PROJECTING BILINGUALISM

THE BILINGUALISM PROJECT

CONTENTS

· ·

WELCOME

....

"You indirectly give students life tools: critical thinking, creativity, empathy. This gives them strength to face everyday life."

~ Parent

What role does English-language teaching, and that too in rural Tuscany, have in the world today? With online translation, television shows in different languages, and language learning apps, why should parents drive their children up to an hour through the hills after school and on early, foggy Saturday mornings to sit in a classroom and learn a language that many of them may not even 'need' in their studies and careers?

The answer to this is twofold. The first is the opportunities that English, no matter its politics, gives to young learners, employers, and employees. In this respect, many (not all) of

our students' families are already well placed: Montalcino is a rural area, but since the mid-late 20th Century, a relatively rich one, following the mass development of the land and the emergence of Brunello wine on the international stage, and the accompanying tourism. Most young people leave school with a decent level of English, and many go on to university. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, students can grow into the world with a sense of ability, confidence, and empathy that straightforward language learning is unlikely to give them. In addition to the confidence that comes with overcoming a new language – learning at every stage to do everything from asking for a tissue to resolving conflicts or making friends – students from the Bilingualism Project grow up with the personal abilities, values, and behaviours that we have made central to our teaching and learning.

The Bilingualism Project is complex and layered, evolving every year, if not every month. After four years of working with our families and students, we have arrived at a point where we can cement our practices into a system that can be adapted and adopted in different schools. There is no single 'Bilingualism Project' definition: our teachers, our principles, our curriculum, and our methods integrate to become a teaching and learning community. Throughout

this book we will walk you through our Bilingualism Project which, since 2016, has been raising students to become kinder, more independent, more confident, and more compassionate individuals with a knowledge base that will take them far, whether this be across the globe or in the very neighbourhood where their grandparents were born. This project has become our family and our home, and we are delighted that it might become yours, too.

MEET THE LEADERS

Patricia Natalicchio, Founder

After successfully founding and running a full English school in Buenos Aires, when Patricia and her family moved to Italy, she had her sights set high. Patricia put in the hours – years – to make herself an established, recognised, and respected member of the close-knit and age-old small rural communities that characterised her new home, volunteering at the local schools and teaching students at home. Patricia continually ensures she remains a student, taking courses, reading extensively, and finding new ways to share her knowledge and experience with those around her. Now, almost two decades later, the Creating Connections family, both her family working at the school and the wider family they have created in doing, have become her lifeline, bringing transformative holistic education to rural Tuscany.

With a graduate degree in interpretation and six languages under her belt, Melina lives and breathes in the world of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural learning. Almost by accident, Melina discovered that teaching was a stronger calling than she had realised, and has not looked back. Amidst art and interpreting, travelling and life changes, teaching has remained her constant, with many students having grown up with her as their older sister. Melina has more energy than ever before, having already led the foundation of the project with Patricia as well as core components such as Learning Companions, Yoga and Literature, and the Buddy Project, and is keen to see the Bilingualism Project grow into schools across Italy and elsewhere.

Bilingualism Project Students

Our students are a strange and wonderful bunch: they run from age 4 to age 14, are rambunctious and curious, full of oddities and emotions, funny and frustrating, they make silly

errors and take Italianish to new heights, but say, create, ask, and contribute things that surprise and impress us every day. They think critically, work inventively, both in school and outside, and have created a community, both between themselves and with us, that defines our school. We hope that, as you read this book, you will get a little window into our students and be able to share a bit of our enjoyment of them.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Structural note

Throughout the book we will be covering a lot of information and theory. The 'Classroom spotlight' features break away from this, giving you a little peek into a classroom: a student, an interaction, an event – something that stood out to us and that helps to bring the information to life.

You will also find a glossary at the back of the book, which we encourage you to refer to regularly, both to facilitate your reading and to help prevent misconceptions from leading to malpractices. Words in **bold** can be found in the glossary.

This book is designed to be used by school leaders, teachers, and parents alike. While most of the content is uniform and applicable to all, we recognise the particular needs and concerns of each group. Look out for the "A

note for parents/teachers/school leaders" sections throughout the book for information specifically for you.

A note for parents

If your child's school runs a Bilingualism Project, this guide will help you navigate it along with the teachers, providing you with an initial theoretical grounding to understand the school's practices, helping you to tie your child's learning to other domains of their growth, and giving you ideas and tips for supporting the school and your child at home.

Crucially, even if your child's school has nothing of the sort, this book can be an invaluable tool in their education. The fact that the Bilingualism Project is more a holistic education than simply language teaching means that you as a parent can be equipped to incorporate the same theories and practices in raising your child. Your family might be bilingual, your child might have started learning a new language at school, or you might simply be seeking a helping hand, from our family to yours – whatever the case may be, this book has something for you.

If your school has established or is establishing a Bilingualism Project, this book is your handbook. It can be easy in the midst of everyday teaching to lose sight of the aims, values, and practices with which one set out. It can also be lonely, navigating new dynamics, needs, and approaches, especially if they feel far from what one knows. We hope that this book offers you a companion, whether to provide theories, information, and activities, or to talk you through classroom challenges and share our learning.

If your school does not have a Bilingualism Project, depending on the structures and flexibility of your school, the Bilingualism Project principles (such as behaviour management, mixed-ability classrooms, rural schooling, peer support, physical activity, and pupil-based learning) can be readily implemented in your everyday teaching.

A note for school leaders

A Bilingualism Project as it stands in our school is an entire system of teaching and learning. Although the Bilingualism Project functions best with a significantly larger number of hours, it is well within the realm of an existing language or

regular school to begin implementing the philosophies and practices of the Bilingualism Project, while potentially scaling up students' contact time. School leaders should pay attention to the notes for teachers and for parents as well, to help you anticipate their concerns or needs, and recognise their role in the system from the outset.

ORIGINS

"Parents wanted to know why their children were happier coming to our school, and in some cases only wanted to come here, rather than going to their mainstream school."

~ Patricia Natalicchio

It is hard to do better than the quote above to summarise why the Bilingualism Project came into being. Creating Connections was a regular language school, offering **English as a Foreign Language (EFL)** lessons to students for two hours after school. It seems, however, that Creating Connections was not merely a 'regular' language school. What is it that made the lessons different?

"We noticed that when we created our own content, very often [the students] were more engaged in their lessons, either because it was content directed at them, that interested them, or maybe because it was something that

interested me as a teacher, so I could convey it with more passion, and [feel that] the lesson belonged to me.

Yes, teach with more passion, so the children were more engaged. [This] happened with one lesson, two lessons; what would happen if we had more time to work like that? [That is] how we decided to extend the teaching hours so that we could explore more content, and [address] children's needs, our needs to create more content [that is] adapted to the children, and parents' need to have a type of education that is different from mainstream schools."

~ Melina Nestore

Parents picked up on this passion and engagement and approached the school to ask us to set up a full-fledged school. In a community so rooted in a strong state education system, the best way of giving parents, students, and teachers the time, content, and environment they desired was to expand English language teaching as far as possible, integrating different 'mainstream' subjects with our regular teaching methods.

The Bilingualism Project pilot began with just two classes and twenty students in total.

- 'School 1' was a group of students around the age of 6, and they now constitute the current 'School 4/5'.

- 'School 4' consisted of students who were 9-10 years old and had been studying English since the age of 5. They are now the current 'School 6/7'.

We ran a one-month trial in May 2015, with 4 Saturdays of two hours each, one subject per Saturday. The four subjects were Language, Literature, Science, and Mathematics.

Based on children's existing school days, we settled on a model of 6 hours per week. We took the Cambridge Primary curriculum, which as a starting point provided a broad, flexible structure, adaptable to the children's emotional, intellectual, and social needs. The Cambridge Primary curriculum is designed for a minimum of 18 hours per week, which presented the significant task of modifying it to make a 6-hour curriculum, encompassing the four subjects. Aspects of Mathematics are still included in Science teaching, which otherwise focuses on Biology and environmental sciences. This year we introduced   Social

Studies as a subject that students were interested in, that we had the expertise to teach, and that filled a gap in their mainstream Italian schooling, and students have responded exceptionally well to both Science and Social Studies.

AIMS AND VALUES

"We hope our children will be able to face the world through different perspectives, thanks to the mental flexibility that they develop through every lesson."

~ Parent

The Bilingualism Project is a family project: firstly and most obviously because from the reception to the classroom, the school trips to the coordination, we are a family-run school. Secondly because teachers who join are treated like family, and in turn treat the students like their own children or siblings. And finally, because parents' commitment to their children's learning is integral to our success. Thirdly, through experience and formal courses, we have founded our school on family engagement. From regular meetings to informal

encounters, parent involvement in events, and finally our School for Parents, the families of Creating Connections play a crucial role in enabling out students' learning.

Although it was parents who first approached us to start a full school, it was also parents who needed most convincing to give it a go. We invested time in helping parents to feel a stronger sense of belonging to Creating Connections, and to understand the school's philosophy. Making it clear that children would not be sitting still for five hours, but rather would be creating, playing, and interacting, was crucial for developing the initial momentum for the project. After the trial and later on, it was often the children who convinced those parents who were unsure about enrolling in the Bilingualism Project.

Through the curriculum content, the extracurriculars, and the culture we create in the gaps, Creating Connections is driven at every stage by a core set of values. No matter if and how you choose to implement the Bilingualism Project, recognising the values that underpin what we share with you can make all the difference to how you educate.

Teamwork

Through the Buddy Project in particular, but equally through our everyday interactions with students, students are expected to see themselves as team members. Tasks and assessments are often in small groups or pairs so that students peer-teach, with the teacher noting both their existing knowledge and their abilities to share and absorb information. Small classes mean students of different ages are expected to look out for each other on the playground and find themselves playing together without any prompting. Within the classroom, students are used to being asked to help their peers during independent work, share an answer during Circle Time discussions, or complete an activity together during the weekly whole-school assemblies.

Respect

One afternoon, the students of our eldest class were sent back out of the school after having filed in for their lessons. They were told that at this school, we do not arrive or leave without greeting each other, and so were swiftly asked to try again, this time with a "Hello Angel," whose presence at the reception had been completely ignored. From that day they almost without fail greet the team with a hello and a

goodbye, even if while glued to their phones. This is not to say that the school is a perfect, polite haven – there have been and will be countless talks about sulking or whining, demanding or ignoring – but rather that students know what we expect, and for the most part, are pleased to be a part of it.

Open-mindedness

Open-mindedness takes multiple forms: towards new tasks and topics, new ways of learning, and new cultures and communities. Through Literature and Social Studies students are exposed to a wide range of stories, histories, conflicts, and lives from the past and from around the world; throughout the Bilingualism lessons the ways of learning change from one week to the next, requiring students to be ready to take on the task of writing something they have never tried before, learning how to communicate a complex task to their peers, or stepping outside the familiar space of desks and worksheets.

Perhaps most of all, however, the value of open-mindedness lies in the fine, necessary, and often ignored balance of giving students the opportunity to "see that there is something outside Montalcino and the Val d'Orcia," says

Patricia, while giving them a reason to remain, to recognise their community, and have a means of contributing. In rural Tuscany, there is a dichotomy between young people who have limited exposure to the rest of the world, in terms of ways of living and thinking alternative possibilities, and simultaneously a desire to leave their homes, driven by the sense – often the knowledge –   that there are limited opportunities for them to engage in what they see as the exciting, new, contemporary ways of living and working that seem so far from where they live. We seek to create a community with 21st Century linguistic, academic, and social skills, consisting of young people who, through school trips, events, and lessons, have developed an interest in investigating other places and lives. We hope that in doing so, they begin to bring back skills, ideas, and people from around the world, and ultimately, appreciate and enhance the little pocket of it that they call their own.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In this section we will talk you through an outline of the components and features of the Bilingualism Project, before giving you a detailed look into them in the following section.

Classes

As the Bilingualism Project stands now, there are four mixed-ability classes. School 6/7 have regular school on Saturday mornings, and therefore complete all 6 hours during the week after school.

Students are grouped roughly by age, but ultimately by linguistic level and personal maturity, moving up to the next class once they are academically and mentally ready, occasionally at the start of the new term in January, if necessary.

Class	Age	Hours	Subjects
School 1	5-7	1 hour on weekdays; 5 hours on Saturday mornings	Literature, Language, Phonics, Science
School 2/3	7-10	1 hour on weekdays; 5 hours on Saturday mornings	Literature, Language, Phonics, Science, Social Science
School 4/5	9 - 12	1 hour on weekdays; 5 hours on Saturday mornings	Literature, Language, Phonics, Social Science
School 6/7	11 -13	6 hours on weekdays	Literature, Language, Social Science

Language

Across our teaching, we foreground inductive methods: guiding students to discover the rules of grammar, how to find and learn new vocabulary. We teach in context, through exposure and an emphasis on the message and purpose, using materials and inputs of a consistently diverse nature.

Buddy Project

A programme in which students volunteer their time to be regular 'assistant teachers' and student helpers in a class, initially created to help students develop their self-esteem and solidarity with their peers.

Mixed abilities

Due predominantly to a lack of teachers, classes are mixed ability, creating both significant learning challenges and discrepancies as well as opportunities for better growth, teamwork, and more diverse learning approaches.

Literature and yoga

The process of using yoga – breathing, meditation, collaboration, poses, movements, and overall physical

participation – to engage with a wide variety of stories, based on the Rainbow Yoga for Kids programme.

Full Immersion and Summer Camps

Themed weekends at an Agriturismo and longer summer camps that give children extended language exposure, greater holistic skill development, and opportunities for more varied and collaborative activities, and allow families to participate in more intensive language learning even if not part of the Bilingualism Project.

The Book Project

Regular individual and small-group reading sessions, using dialogic reading strategies, and with no formal assessment. The teacher notes the students' interest, pronunciation, fluency, confidence, approach, and improvement.

Socio-emotional learning

Continually encouraging students to voice their feelings and responses; giving personal perspectives and emotions a regular place in the classroom; addressing misbehaviour and conflicts through a conversation; and knowing and recognising the influence of students' home realities on their everyday behaviour.

Learning companions

The regular use of our two small dogs, Panchito and Lio, in the school day: to calm an upset child, to be an outlet for a student's communication or emotional upset instead of a teacher, to give them tasks and responsibility, and to participate in training sessions. As part of the Bimbi e Cani sessions at the AgriDog school in Bolsena, children learn how to harness their own emotions and desires through their reflection in dogs.

Science and Art

The curriculum involves Science topics that are familiar enough to be grasped, but with the liberty of making them more interesting or particular than the school-mandated work, and integrating them with what students are studying in other subjects.

Social Studies

The subject takes the form of Social Studies for the younger students, and History and Oracy for School 4/5 and 6/7. Students learn about the histories of different communities and systems, but most importantly how to think critically about and work with diverse information.

Family engagement

The continual participation of, communication, and learning with families: through projects at school; communicating about and collaborating on the personal and academic development of individual children; and through the School for Parents sessions.

ROOTS AND BRANCHES: WHAT WE BUILD ON AND HAT SETS US APART

....

The Bilingualism Project builds on a number of approaches developed throughout the years in order to address socio-emotional and cognitive developmental stages and issues faced by children in pre-primary, primary, and lower-secondary education. Furthermore, building on literature on multiple intelligences, intellectual styles, and related pedagogies, we aim at introducing the importance of kinaesthetic, artistic, emotional, and **oracy** skills in order to achieve a whole-child approach to language teaching and learning. Finally, our teaching is rooted in the sociocultural context of the area[1], tailoring our approach to the community's needs, values, and aims.

---

[1] Coyle, D. (2007). Content and Language integrated Learning: Towards a Connected Research Agenda for CLIL Pedagogies. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 10 (5), pp. 543-562.

BILINGUALISM

Bilingual education has been a subject of study for many years now, with different authors and researchers giving different meaning to the term. Moreover, there are hundreds of programs giving parents the possibility of having a bilingual child, without ever taking a step back to define what exactly is meant by the term *bilingualism*. At our school, we take the following definition of bilingualism.

Being bilingual does not only mean being able to produce formulaic phrases such as greetings or asking for directions in a foreign language[2] but it requires the ability to show **morphosyntactic** *competence as well as* **communicative** *competence.*

While the morphosyntactic aspect of language learning is often the focus of language programmes and schooling, it is also essential to take into account the plurality of factors which constitute someone's *communicative* ability, from

---

[2] Myers-Scotton, C. (2006). Multiple Voices: An introduction to bilingualism. Blackwell Publishing.

simple elements as pronunciation and intonation, to more complex ones involving empathy, **dialectic**, and construction of an argument. These are essential to children's thinking and learning, and, as shown by the educationist Robin Alexander, "[essential] to their productive engagement in classroom life, especially in early and primary years"[3]. Building on the work of Andrew Wilkinson[4], we aim at making *oracy*, the process of formulating and expressing complex ideas through spoken language, central to children's linguistic and cognitive development, giving it the same level of importance as literacy and numeracy. We believe the development of oracy skills to be essential not only in the early stages of linguistic development but also in the later stages, when critical thinking skills become central to every lesson and being able to articulate complex ideas. There is a misconception that communicative and oracy skills only concern speaking abilities[5]. Yet, our aim is to emphasise children's listening and socio-emotional skills, in order to help them develop arguments, build on each others' ideas,

---

[3] Alexander, R. J., (2013). Improving oracy and classroom talk: achievements and challenges. Primary first, pp.3

[4] Wilkinson, A. (1970). *The concept of Oracy.* The English Journal 59(1).

[5] Shi Hui Mah, A. (2016). Oracy is as important as literacy: Interview with C. M. Goh. RELC Journal 47(3).

and debating abilities. In order to look into these aspects of linguistic competence and cognitive abilities, it is fundamental to define exactly what it means to be bilingual, the distinctions between one's first and second language, and what impact bilingualism and multilingualism can have on a child's **cognitive**, emotional, and social skills.

It is common to refer to one's native language as L1. The L1 is the language in which a person shows high **grammatical**, **lexical**, and co**mmunicat**ive skills. From birth, children are exposed to their L1 and most often reach a proficient level in it, particularly in the oral and communicative sphere. In contrast, people might have different degrees of competence in grammatical, lexical, and communicative skills in their second language, the L2[6]. It is expected that a bilingual or multilingual person will have different degrees of competence in their L1 and L2, and this does not hinder the development of bilingualism. As a child develops two or more languages simultaneously, they might recur to multilingual utterances and **code-switching**, mixing two or more languages together in the same sentence, or using L2 vocabulary while speaking in the L1.

[6] Myers-Scotton, (2006). Multiple Voices: an introduction to Bilingualism. Blackwell Publishing

There has been a long-standing misconception that mixing languages was a problem, signalling weakness and confusion in the speaker's grasp of the two languages. In recent years, however, there has been a growing understanding that code-switching is in fact a mark of high linguistic command, the ability to optimise one's use of each language in a way that is aligned to one's interlocutors and the context[7]. Although within the context of a language classroom students are expected to continually use the target language without recourse to their first language, in practical settings at home or elsewhere code-switching is a normal, positive part of language use. It has also been suggested that code-switching within the language classroom can enhance students' learning and academic achievement, offering them the opportunity to engage with more complex ideas, concepts, and activities.

Being able to use two or more languages also has a positive impact on children's holistic development.

- It enhances the ability of children to understand and attribute mental states to themselves and others, i.e. emotions, beliefs, intents. Known as **Theory of Mind**,

---

[7] Bialystock and Viswanathan (2009). Components of executive control with advantages for bilingual children in two cultures. Cognition, 112(3), 494–500.

this ability can be essential in both socio-emotional and cognitive abilities of children.

- Children develop their **executive functioning** skills, which include working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. Flexible thinking, or cognitive flexibility, is the ability to think about the same idea or problem in a number of different ways, becoming a central skill in both learning and daily life.

The combination of theory of mind and executive functioning is essential to developing the skills children will need at different stages of their lives. Being able to concentrate and pay attention to different tasks simultaneously, the ability to organise and focus efforts, being able to understand different points of view and regulating one's emotions, are capacities that are inextricable from bilingual development. In particular, at Creating Connections we place an emphasis on the development of socio-emotional skills through communicative abilities and emotional literacy, which is the focus of the following section.

EMOTIONAL LITERACY

"We want our students to be happy, both in school and outside, to enjoy learning. We like teaching them the importance of finding an objective and following it, being consistent throughout the process and enjoying it. To this end, we try to show and teach them to face difficulties, not to avoid them, to think about solutions and to adapt to possible changes during the process. In some cases this comes from the process of solving problems for a project; in others we 'create' problems and challenges. Children are great observers, and absorb what they see us do and say, picking up on the approaches and traits we display, such as flexibility, creativity, passion, or motivation. We seek to demonstrate what it is to be a person who engages honestly with what they feel, knows they can experience and display sadness, happiness, fear, worry, etc., and can care about themselves and others."

~ Patricia Natalicchio

Language acquisition is inextricably linked to socio-emotional and relational factors. For this reason, we believe

that an exploration of the ways in which L2 competences are acquired cannot be separated from an inquiry into children's relational and emotional development. In this section, we build on literature from **socio-emotional learning** and wellbeing in order to present ways in which these are fundamental for children's linguistic and relational competences. Socio-emotional learning has been identified as a crucial factor in ensuring school success and well as students' wellbeing[8]. Moreover, research has found that a lack of socio-emotional skills, rather than low cognitive abilities, are the most common traits across students dropping out of school[9]. For these reasons, we believe emotional literacy to be a fundamental element in any form of education.

Emotional literacy, also known as emotional intelligence, is the ability to monitor and regulate one's emotions and feelings, as well as being able to recognise them in others. In turn, this information is used to deal with particularly challenging situations or problems[10]. Research has shown

---

[8] Fettig, A., (2018). Using dialogic reading strategies to promote socio-emotional skills for young students: an exploratory case study in an after-school program. Journal of early childhood research 16(4)

[9] ibid.

[10] Salovey and Mayer (1990), *Emotional intelligence*. Imagination, Cognition and Personality 9(3).

emotional literacy to be fundamental to managing one's emotions in relation to one's goals - which can be familial, educational, or professional - and to limit interpersonal conflict. Moreover, emotional literacy has been shown to be the moderator factor between intelligence and academic performance[11]. It is not uncommon to meet students who are intelligent and creative, but who are not able to translate these skills in academic performance or interpersonal interactions.

Why 'literacy' and not 'intelligence'?

We believe that using the term intelligence could portray individuals' emotional abilities as a trait that is innate. Instead, we understand emotional skills as an ability that can be developed throughout one's lifetime[12], in the same way linguistic literacy skills can be improved.

Our emphasis on emotional literacy is based on the belief that every child can develop their capacity to recognise, understand, and manage their emotions through interactions and activities. Building on research by Daniel

---

[11] Hasenne, M., and Legrand, J., (2012). Creativity, emotional intelligence, and school performance. International Journal of Educational Research 53

[12] ibid.

Goleman[13], we work on five different dimensions of emotional literacy:

- Awareness of own emotions
- Control of own emotions
- Personal motivation through emotions
- Empathy or understanding others
- The capacity of creating relations

Our aim is to work on these five different 'emotional skills' through different approaches, ranging from dialogic reading to peer-to-peer support, and collaborative project-based learning.

Dialogic reading, the process of having a conversation with students around what they are reading, can be used as a tool to develop emotional literacy[14]. Indeed, reading with a student does not only help to work towards linguistic proficiency, but is an opportunity to help them develop prosocial skills, reflection, perspective taking, empathy and

---

[13] Goleman, D., (2001). Emotional Intelligence. Bantam.

[14] Fettig, A., (2018). Using dialogic reading strategies to promote socio-emotional skills for young students: an exploratory case study in an after-school program. Journal of early childhood research 16(4).

creativity. Students' individual reading and related conversations can help identify how characters in a story might be feeling, providing students with the ability to identify others' emotions while also reflecting on their own feelings. Similarly, group reading can help students create relations with their peers, as they develop the capacity to respect each others' turn to read and reflect on peers' ideas and comments. In the Book Project section we detail the origins, structure, and nature of our reading sessions.

Peer-to-peer facilitation, with students acting as mediators for their peers in relation to the teacher or an activity, can be an effective way in which pupils can develop their socio-emotional skills. Indeed, through facilitating knowledge for their peers, students have a chance to develop responsibility and self-management, and identify emotions in others.

Similarly to peer-to-peer facilitation, collaborative learning processes help students build relationships with each other through learning. When given a task to carry out in small groups, students are able to better expose their beliefs and uncertainties regarding a particular topic, allowing for the creation of social relations, regulation of their emotions and development of empathy.

MULTIPLE LEARNING STYLES

Why is that a student can be considered dumb by one teacher but smart by another? How is it possible that a student can fail a multiple-choice test but excel at an individual project?

~ Li-Fang Zhang, *The Malleability of Intellectual Styles*

In his 1983 book, Howard Gardner developed the theory of multiple intelligences, according to which there is not a single standard 'intelligence', but rather nine different ways of approaching ideas and problem-solving. We have often come across parents who have been told that their children are just not made for language learning. Similarly, other pupils are told that they are not creative at all, and that they should dedicate their efforts to logical subjects such as maths or physics. Still others are led down a 'Multiple Intelligences trap', in which a test or activity at school designed to 'determine' students' learning styles or intelligence types leads them and their parents to believe that there is one 'intelligence' that the student ought to use, and that all other forms of teaching and learning are

counterproductive, even harmful, to the student's learning. At Creating Connections we aim at taking a stance which opposes these misconceptions.

Teachers or parents who label some students as capable and others as not being suited for learning miss the fundamental question of whether the type of instruction and activities the students are receiving are conducive to the children's preferred way of learning. Conversely, teachers and parents who deem other types of instruction/learning as relatively useless miss the fundamental concept that all input, especially varied input, is of use to all learners. A child may use multiple types of intelligences within one lesson. The crucial aspect is to provide them with input that feeds a range of intelligences, harnessing their 'preferred' styles, and training their receptiveness to others.

- Visual-spatial
- Linguistic-verbal
- Interpersonal
- Intrapersonal
- Logical-mathematical
- Musical
- Bodily-kinesthetic

- Naturalistic
- Existential

(Adapted from Gardner's Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences)

We structure our teaching around developing creative ways for students to use all learning styles and intelligences flexibly, fostering underdeveloped cognitive and socio-emotional skills. The extent to which a student displays a preferred learning style varies significantly. For most students, there is no clear 'preferred' learning style. Paired with our teaching style involving a combination of images, words, and audio to convey a single concept or piece of information, we meet most students' needs in an organic, balanced lesson structure. Others present strong learning preferences from an early age. For example in some of our students, it is evident that they are happiest drawing, and, for various reasons, have a tendency to disengage when presented with text to read or writing tasks. We expose such students to the same varied input as others, but may make modifications when it comes to production, or prepare more visual backup resources if we expect the general resources will feel overwhelming. In this case, a

student might receive a supplementary set of images, or we might suggest that they draw their mind map rather than writing. We accompany writing tasks with space to illustrate, offering a student who balks at writing an outlet waiting for them.

Building on and developing Gardner's work, Li-Fang Zhang explains how styles of learning and approaching problems (intellectual styles), are not fixed and unchangeable in each of us. Instead, she argues that intellectual styles are flexible and "malleable". Following Zhang's work, students' preferred learning styles can be identified and students encouraged to go beyond the ways of working they find easy and comfortable. This should be done with the specific aim of helping students develop novel ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge, in order to avoid labelling students as 'failing' if they underperform.

Building on the work of Howard Gardner, author of the book Multiple Intelligences, and Li-fang Zhang, author of The Malleability of Intellectual Styles, we structure our teaching around two main objectives:

1. Using children's preferred way of learning to enhance their cognitive and emotional development

2. Take children out of their comfort zone to develop novel ways of learning and interacting with others

CLIL: TAKING IT FURTHER

Second language (L2) learning is generally perceived as a separate entity in children's education. Innovative approaches, child-centred pedagogies, etc., do not generally make it to the L2 classroom. One step in this direction are **Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)** methodologies which, by integrating the foreign language into non-language subject content (typically in addition to standard language-only lessons) has been shown to sustainably increase students' academic results[15] and their motivation with respect to the language[16] but CLIL still tends to focus on L2 learning per se, giving rise to two key distinctions between CLIL methods and our teaching:

---

[15] Dalton-Puffer, C. 2011. Content-and-Language Integrated Learning: From Practice to Principles? Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 31, pp. 182–204.
 Pérez-Cañado, M. L. 2012. *CLIL Research in Europe: Past, Present, and Future*. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 15 (3), pp. 315-341.
Merino, J.A. and Lasagabaster, D. (2015). *CLIL as a way to multilingualism*. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 21 (1), pp. 79-92.

[16] Pladevall-Ballester, E. (2019). A longitudinal study of primary school EFL learning motivation in CLIL and non-CLIL settings. Language Teaching Research, 23 (6), pp. 765-786.

- CLIL functions on using non-language content, such as science, literature, art, etc., *as part of* language teaching. In this sense, the content leans towards being more of a component or a temporary vehicle. In the Bilingualism Project, we teach subjects in their own right, entirely in English.

- CLIL does not necessarily take a whole-child approach to language acquisition. There have been research into and recommendations for rendering CLIL teaching more holistic (e.g. culture, cognition, communication, and content[17]) but studies of CLIL teaching in Europe have found that pedagogies often adapt, although not always in a focused, intentional, sociocultural manner. Rather, pedagogies can slide into being largely focused on the transmission of content, at the expense of the language, or, conversely, focus disproportionately on the language, without sufficient regard for how best to teach the

---

[17] Coyle, D. (1999) Theory and planning for effective classrooms: Supporting students in content and language integrated learning contexts. In J. Masih (ed.) *Learning Through a Foreign Language*. London: CILT.

subject at hand[18].

In the absence of needing to follow an imposed curriculum, we don't run the risk of our teaching slipping into being transmission-focused. And while we are at heart a 'language school', our measured curriculum, project-based approach, and appropriate division of subjects across teachers allow us to give each subject its due, striving for understanding and engagement above all.

---

[18] Coyle, D. (2007). Content and Language integrated Learning: Towards a Connected Research Agenda for CLIL Pedagogies. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 10 (5), pp. 543-562.

PUPIL-BASED LEARNING

In a study of students' stress, health, and school engagement, Hammerin et al. (2018) highlight with clarity and astuteness the consequences of growing pressures on teachers and tangible academic results, a "one-dimensional and narrow focus on qualifications, and a neglect of educational dimensions of socialisation and subjectification" (the latter being the process of seeing oneself and being treated as a 'subject', someone whose opinions and actions are welcomed treated as valuable). In response to these trends, sharing responsibility, working collaboratively, communicating effectively and regularly, and developing whole-school involvement in decision making – how to learn, what to learn, and how to engage with each other[19] – play a significant role in promoting students individual health, as well as wider societal democratic health[20]. Hodges and Cullen (2012) apply the question of participation to students as young as four, noting the

---

[19] Bessant, J., Farthing, R., and Watts, R. (2016). Co-designing a civics curriculum: Young people, democratic deficit and political renewal in the EU. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 48, pp. 271-289.

[20] Hammerin, Z., Andersson, E., and Maivorsdotter, N. (2018). Exploring student participation in teaching: An aspect of student health in school.

significant role that participation (taken in a diverse and challenging form) plays in students' learning.

Pupil-based or student-centred learning has diverse and evolving definitions. For some it is taken as simply as personalising work for students (which others argue ought to be central to teaching in general), while others give students extensive responsibility in determining what they do during the school day. At Creating Connections we draw heavily on the democratic processes outlined above, and the individualisation of learning through differentiated (whether by level, means, or nature) resources and activities. While projects and the content necessary are initially driven by the teacher, students play an active role in determining what the potential project could be, what it will look like, and how they can best execute it. On a more 'passive' level, we as teachers are continually attentive to the students interests, abilities, and lived realities, and adapt our work accordingly. For example, while teaching students about ecosystems and the wildlife in the Val d'Orcia, Melina noticed that the majority of the class had beekeepers in their families and were keen to contribute experiences and information. This led Melina to develop a sub-topic branching out, in which both she and the students taught each other. During individual lessons, keeping the children

first and foremost in mind is central to our practice. Although we seek to maintain constancy and discipline in engaging with their learning, especially for older students, we prioritise responding to the daily abilities of the group. On some days the class will soar effortlessly through the content we plan, while on others we make the choice to deviate, to engage in the activity or topic that their energy levels and states of being enable.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Project-based learning is a method that can be easily misunderstood and misapplied. This is in part due to the inherent positive diversity of the method, but also to excessive reduction or simplification of the concept.

Across its variations, there are three key aspects of project-based learning:

- its rootedness in real-world issues that are meaningful for students

- the emphasis on the process of addressing the issue

- the issue sitting at the heart of the work, rather than trailing it

- the integrated role of learning curricular content and skills

The following table from the Buck Institute for Education's 'PBL Works' website breaks down the core differences between a commonly found project and 'project-based learning'.

"Doing a project"	Project-based learning
An add-on to the traditional instruction; at the end of (or alongside) the unit	Instruction integrated into the project (The project is the unit!)
Follows direction of the teacher	Driven by student inquiry
Focused on product	Focused on product and process
Often unrelated to standards and skills	Aligned to academic standards and success skills
Can be completed alone and/or at home	Involves collaboration with students and in-class guidance from teacher
Remains within the school world	Has real-world context and application

End result of project displayed in the classroom	Results of project shared beyond the classroom with a public audience

In terms of the science of learning, the central tenet of project-based education is the integration of learning *content* and *practice*, so as to enable genuine understanding and engagement. This has its its roots in four theoretical bases: active construction [of knowledge by learners], situated learning [in real, meaningful contexts], social interactions [with a range of peers and educators], and cognitive tools [both new and familiar][21]. The content and practices are entirely geared towards their response to the given question or problem, and the practices involve collaborative work and technologies/materials that allow them to work beyond their independent capacities. It is also important to produce 'artefacts' or physical representations or outcomes of their learning that can be externalised and analysed[22].

---

[21] Krajcik, J.S. and Blumenfeld, P.C. (2012). 'Project-based learning', in K.R. Sawyer (Ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences*. Cambridge University Press.

[22] ibid.

Solomon[23] refers to "empower[ing] [students] with responsibility for their own education," a statement that reveals both the exciting potential and the potential risks of project-based education. The 'responsibility' Solomon refers to does not mean leaving students to their own devices, without content, practices, or curriculum structure from the teacher[24], but rather allowing their investigation to be the engine of their method of learning. Students learn that without their inquiry, effort, experimentation, research, independent thinking, and collaboration, their learning would lose both its means and its meaning. They also learn that the aims, answers, or next steps will not always be given to them[25], that they will often have to assess information and the situation to determine the most appropriate course of action. Further noted benefits include stronger communication skills, higher-order thinking skills, linguistic proficiency, self-efficacy, and self-esteem[26],

---

[23] Solomon, G. (2003). Project-Based Learning: A Primer. *Technology and Learning,* 23 (6).

[24] Thomas, J.W. (2000). A Review of Research on Project Based Learning. California: The Autodesk Foundation.

[25] Kavlu, A. (2007). Implementation of Project Based Learning (PBL) in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Classrooms in Fezalar Educational Institutions (Iraq). *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies*, 4 (2), pp. 67-79.

[26] Simpson, J. 2011). Integrating Project-Based Learning in an English Tourism Classroom in a Thai University. *Australian Catholic University, Doctoral Thesis.* Sydney, Australia.

supporting our aim to educate students holistically through a second language.

In order to meet all the above-mentioned needs, and avoid students feeling lost or directionless, the teachers need substantial time, independence, and research skills to identify and provide appropriate materials and scaffolding for students at each stage of their work. Furthermore, on a relational level, project-based education can be a source of relatively frequent strain and conflict as students try to determine how to share the workload, and teachers seek to help students navigate situations where some students deliberately work less than others, or where different learning styles, speeds, and abilities intersect[27]. A school needs to be prepared with socio-emotional and relational strategies to help guide students and teachers, and teachers need to be ready to be guides, reference points, team members, and, in the context of EFL, language teachers[28].

Finally, we ensure that the projects take a 'glocal' (global-local) approach: presenting students with contexts that extend far beyond their immediate surroundings, with prompts and opportunities to compare and link these with

---

[27] Markham, T. (2003). Project-based Learning Handbook. Buck Institute for Education.

[28] ibid.

their own context; and studying their local context, with opportunities to review and understand it from different perspectives and integrate it with wider concepts and knowledge[29]. In addition to everyday classroom engagement, this has produced unexpectedly wide-reaching results across age groups, including:

- Matilda, 8, typically reserved, wrote a history of her family's roots in the Val d'Orcia with her mother, including funny and bittersweet stories, photos, and the note that she now wants to write a book about her family in the Val d'Orcia.

- Paolo, 10, with relatively low confidence in his English and generally limited participation, was at his best presenting his home on Mount Amiata to the group, after which he, for the first time, went to tell his mother about how well he had done.

- Alberto, 14, chose to do his middle school presentation, the main assessment before entering high school, on Iris Origo and the Val d'Orcia,

[29] Chaiklin, S., & Hedegaard, M. (2009). Radical-local teaching and learning: a cultural-historical perspective on education and children's development. In M. Fleer, M. Hedegaard, & J. Tudge (Eds.), *Childhood studies and the impact of globalization: global and local policies and practices* (pp. 182-201). (World Yearbook of Education). London: Routledge.

enabling a depth of engagement and range of possibilities in the face of a school year otherwise dampened by the COVID-19

CURRICULUM

Evolution

The Bilingualism Project **curriculum** is a standout aspect of the project, and has also been a significant challenge. For the first couple of years, the **syllabus** loosely followed Cambridge Primary and Cambridge Global English as a framework, while being continually built around the students, their interests, what the teachers felt they would enjoy or what was relevant to their current realities, as well as new concepts and content that teachers themselves were learning, such as oracy or yoga.

These changes and additions often respond to absences in the students' existing school curricula. History and oracy were added when we realised that students wanted to engage with complex topics and discussions but did not have the opportunity to do so during History at school.

Similarly, the integration of yoga with Literature originated from a recognition that the students' apprehension of Literature stemmed from their associations with how they learned it at school: sat at desks, listening, often bored and insufficiently challenged.

Mathematics, on the other hand, was dropped because, being language teachers first and foremost, we could not make it a significant and well-taught part of the students' language learning, especially for a subject in which miscommunication can so easily cause long-term knowledge gaps. We instead began integrating number work into the Language and Literature lessons for younger students, where appropriate.

We have always made a concerted effort to integrate the topics across subjects. For example, while students are studying a Native American story in Literature, they are studying the history and lives of a Native American community in History; while they are planting a vegetable garden in Science, in Language they are learning how to describe whether the vegetables grow under or above the ground, and the students continue to show growing recognition and engagement. This integration rapidly

evolved into whole-school projects, which are explained below.

By the third year, the Cambridge textbooks had become almost exclusively a safety net – occasional buffers, starting points for stories or activities, or fillers for projects. As we enter our fifth year, the projects that have until now set us apart are taking the prime place, as a project-based bilingual curriculum. This curriculum is unique to the Bilingualism Project, taking our learning from our years of testing methods and materials to create a curriculum that is structured enough to be taken from year to year, or school to school, and flexible enough to maintain our adaptive way of teaching, with our fingers on the pulse of the students and the world around them.

Projects and interdisciplinarity

From the outset, projects have formed a part of the way children learn in the Bilingualism Project. In the past, these included smaller projects that emerged at the end of a topic based on students' preferences, ideas, and current events; seasonal projects such as at Christmas; and those that followed a more formal project-based learning model, in which a challenge is established at the start, and its

resolution forms the structure of the topic, determining the skills students need to the develop, the vocabulary and grammar they require, and the activities relevant to building up to their final output. The formal project-based learning had various starting points: at times an area that students explored, at others a problem or question they sought to answer.

Most students at Creating Connections have been rooted in this area, and more specifically their particular village in the area, for generations. Perhaps characteristic of more recent generations, however, they are often lacking in real knowledge about their area and country, let alone others. Our projects are designed to help them learn more about their local area and how to relate it to wider issues, history and contexts. In one term they might be studying stories from around the world, while in another they might be studying the Italian landscape. Our *Iris Origo and the Val d'Orcia* project, described below, for example, took students on a journey through studying their own region, families, and historically influential people in the area. Conversely, in literature, students studied art and conceptualisations of the sun and moon in different indigenous communities in India, environmental initiatives in

different parts of the world, and the role of colonialism in shaping countries today.

Whatever form the project took, we typically sought to complete a medium-sized one in autumn, a small one at Christmas, and a larger one at the end of the school year in May-June. From 2020/21 onwards, the curriculum is entirely formally project-based. You will find these new and future projects detailed in the curriculum document. Below are outlines of some of our past projects, for reference, ideas, and to give you an understanding of the evolution of our curriculum.

A formally project-based curriculum requires different planning compared to more standard topic-based curricula, or even curricula that involve projects – teachers often need to create their own resources, be in agreement across subjects, and be able to coordinate their planning with other teachers. It also requires greater flexibility on the part of the school as a whole, which is not always available within education systems where schools are expected to follow strict standardised exams. If going formally project-based is not an option, projects can be included to varying degrees in a standardised curriculum. If your school does not already regularly use projects, or if you are looking to refresh or add to your current repertoire, we hope that the list below gives you some starting points to take or adapt for your school.

Communication

The 'Communication' project began with a question for the school's students: "Does the school website really show what we do at Creating Connections?" The students explored the website and determined that it didn't. The answer to how we could share what we do at Creating Connections, however, evolved far beyond the website. The students brainstormed to develop their project, which quickly grew to include a newspaper, radio, and television broadcast. Over the course of the term, each class worked on the concepts, vocabulary, and skills they needed. Students produced a range of content before beginning to write the content for their final project, rehearsing, and recording. In the case of the radio broadcast, the older students were able to visit Siena radio to learn about broadcasting, and to record and broadcast their programme in the studio.

Partition

While studying the British Empire, students encountered the history of Partition in India and Pakistan. This was done through a number of different sources (documentaries, films,

radio programmes, and images) that helped students navigate the content and build their own opinion and understanding of the end of the British Empire in India. The final aim of the project was to interview a witness of Partition and write a brief biography of someone who has lived through a historical period. This was done by organising a virtual interview with a former indian civil servant.

Letters from the past

As a conclusive project of the first school term, students were asked to describe what had surprised them about life during the Industrial Revolution and compare it to their lives today. They were then asked to imagine they were exchanging letters with someone their age who was living in 19th century Italy, asking each other about the issues societies' faced, what they did in their free time, and how they spent their Christmas. These letters were then edited and put together into a small book that each of the students took home.

Christmas musical

The Christmas musical is one of the most collaborative projects at Creating Connections, with children across age

groups working together to prepare a Christmas-themed musical. In the past, they have performed a version of the film Buddy the Elf, collaborating with the teachers to adapt the script and to assign the best role to each students, according to their age and abilities. What mattered what that everyone had a role to play.

Agriculture

Given that the school is in a rural context, we thought that teaching students topics related to agriculture would be useful both for tapping into their existing knowledge and to help them develop new ideas and learn new content about it in English. For this reason, we planned to visit and interview people on a farm, exploring the cellar and the farm animals with the students. In order to do this, we looked for books and planned teaching units that would include the diverse content they would need for the field trips, using various sources such as websites, local magazines, etc.

London

Over the course of this project, students were asked to research the history of the city of London and to create a

'tour' for their parents in the school. After researching the architecture, history, and monuments of the city, they created posters and cardboard models of the city's buildings, organising a guided tour through the streets of London inside the classroom. This was done in anticipation of a trip to London, in order to encourage students to actively search for information and get to know the city in advance.

<u>Iris Origo</u>

As part of our teaching of local knowledge, we have developed a project on Iris Origo, a historical figure in the Val d'Orcia who during WWII has rescued evacuee children, helped resistance soldiers and prisoners of war, and built schools and hospitals in the area. We gathered content and material on her life and used the project as an opportunity to get students across all age groups to learn about the local geography, biodiversity and history. The final product of the project was the creation of a website which can act as a 'guidebook' for children and adolescents visiting the area where our students live.

Rural schooling

Much of what makes Creating Connections is its location. For one, students come from similar backgrounds, and often the same schools or neighbourhoods. This allows them to form quick bonds with each other but can also bring wider school or community conflicts to the English classroom. In a rural setting more practical concerns, such as the distances that some students have to travel, can dominate as well.

Most significantly, being a relatively isolated and less international community, at least until recently, creates certain cultural differences. Learning a foreign language is traditionally seen as more redundant than in other contexts. This also contributes to common misconceptions, such as that 1) children do not need to start learning language so young, and 2) that an intermediate/communicative level is strong enough for what the area requires, stemming from the historical nature of the area and its needs. In the same vein, without a necessarily strong academic history, some parents are left with insufficient confidence in their abilities to support their children through their work.

A note for parents, teachers, and school leaders
Misconceptions about bilingualism are present everywhere, regardless of a place's remoteness. The best way to combat

misconceptions in the long-run is by demonstration, but in order to begin, a conversation about challenging them in the first place needs to take place. Below are some starting points:

On starting young:

- The wider community is catching up to research's certainty that the younger one learns a language, the more effectively one learns, but misconceptions about whether and how to learn languages pervade, whether in teachers' advice to parents, census questions, or curriculum structures. Research has shown that children are adept at managing more than one language, and that the process of learning them complements rather than hinders each other. Code-switching research consistently demonstrates bilingual speakers' ability to effectively switch between languages with linguistic accuracy, meaning, and attentiveness to the context and their interlocutor. The younger children are exposed to languages, the more effectively they learn these relationships and nuances.

- Much research focuses on determining the extent to which, and contexts in which later second-language learners can attain the code-switching and fluency of younger learners. The fluency displayed by earlier learners is typically taken as a given, and researchers study *how* they attain this fluency and the forms it takes.

- Beyond 'pure' linguistic ability, language-learning has research continues to reveal diverse benefits throughout a learner's life, even into old-age and dementia. At the earliest end of the spectrum, multilingualism gives children a cognitive advantage with stronger 'theory of mind' – the awareness and understanding of other ways of thinking, other's positions, and the relationship between one's own ideas and others', such as identifying another's belief that is different to one's own.

On the level of language required:
- High-quality standard language learning can permit students to undertake higher education or jobs in the language, and certainly where location or finances do

not permit more intensive language learning, this is a fair and reasonable approach. Bilingual learning as it is at Creating Connections, however, gives students the personal and interpersonal skills and the linguistic level that open new, innovative possibilities. Our Bilingualism students are consistently able to work independently and spontaneously, demonstrating an engagement and a creative capacity when faced with activities that tend to leave 'standard' language learners 'paralysed'. Whether creating a website or writing a guidebook, developing radio interviews or interacting with an unfamiliar speaker from a new culture, articulating their views on complex issues or feeling able to integrate their experiences into existing material, these are the skills that give learners a nudge, both academically and later in their professional lives.

A note for parents

At Creating Connections, we try to remind parents that you can always help your child, regardless of whether you know any English at all, have any academic background, or

struggled at school. Some of the best ways in which you can support your child include:

- Asking about their day and lessons, including:

  - What they did

  - How they felt

  - What they contributed

  - What they enjoyed, didn't enjoy, did well at, or struggled with

  - What their friends did, or how their relationships were

Crucially, more than simply asking, it is important to *really* listen, ask follow-up questions, and simply show that you have understood and appreciate what they said. Look into 'active listening' guidelines if you find yourself unsure how to go about it, or speaking more than listening.

- Asking about their homework and, if only for some time, sitting with them while they do it, or if you are

not available during this time, sitting with them before/after to have them explain to you what they will do/did.

- Participating in practice: ask the teacher for a list of spelling words, exercises with an answer script/ answer key, or other such materials that allow you to check your child's work. For oral practice, although you may not be able to correct them, allowing them to practice their spoken piece with you can give them confidence to do it later in class, which can make all the difference to their ability to speak accurately and clearly.

PRACTICAL GUIDE

Teaching strategies

In this section we outline the strategies we employ in our language teaching. To begin with, we set out the strategies and characteristics of 'standard' language teaching   the – our Bilingualism lessons are defined as much by what they are as by what they are *not*. We then respond by explaining the strategies that we *do* use in Bilingualism teaching.

Standard English language lessons

Strategy: Scaffolding approach

Elementary learners learn Elementary language and Advanced learners learn Advanced language, and we don't typically teach Advanced language to Elementary learners. This is motivating for learners, who experience a sense of control and progress, and for teachers, who can teach a course with clear objectives and material that is never too far out of students' reach. However, this is not how language exists in real life[30]. It is an effective but

---

[30] Lewis, M. (1996). "Implications of a lexical view of language". In J. Willis and D. Willis (Eds.) *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Macmillan Education. pp. 10-16.

limited way of teaching language, making generalisations and simplifications on behalf of the students, in the form of rules, labels, and lists.

Our response: Language is not a string of single word units.

Strategy: Presentation-Practice-Production

The body of 'standard' language lessons typically take the following rough form:

- Presentation: A focus on the form, usage, and meaning of a particular portion of language.

- Practice: Controlled practice of this part of the language, perhaps with substitutions.

- Production: Students practice the new language skill/content in a freer way, with *some* autonomy.

Our response: Language is holistic, not atomistic.

Strategy: Textbooks

Textbooks are a key component in most standard ELT programmes. They provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught, and the kinds of language practice students in which students participate. Potential advantages of textbooks include providing structure and a

syllabus for a complete, balanced programme. In the Bilingualism Project we make limited use of textbooks: most material is created by the teacher and adapted from articles, stories, videos, games, podcasts or other audios, interactive multimedia, or students' materials, allowing for a more humanistic, learner-centred, collaborative, and communicative lesson.

Our response: Textbooks do not reflect students' needs.

Bilingualism lessons

It is important to note that this section does not seek to present a new approach to foreign language teaching based on a new theory of language. Rather, it is a description of the combination of approaches that we draw on to teach in our Bilingualism project. In developing this, we considered the following:

1. Who are our learners?

    ○ What is their level?
    ○ What is their context?
    ○ What are their needs?
    ○ What are their likes?
    ○ What allows them to thrive?
    ○

2. What are our objectives?

- ○ Socio-emotional

- ○ Relational

- ○ Communicative

- ○ Linguistic

- ○ Content

3. What projects can we develop to reach these objectives, in line with the school's philosophy?

4. What are our success criteria?

5. What are our methods of evaluation?

Strategy: Language exposure

The 'input hypothesis' [31]

Grammar-based approaches to language teaching deliberately limit input in order to concentrate on grammar and syntax. We believe that greater input brings greater comprehension, and in turn acquisition; students will make mistakes, but accuracy comes with time. Furthermore, our practice is based on the principle that the best way to teach 'speaking' is to focus on listening, reading,

---

[31] Krashen, S. (2009). First edition 1982. Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition. Web.

and encourage free speech, with fluency emerging through these processes.

As such, we focus our language teaching *not* on explicitly teaching language features, but on *communicating messages*, both in the classroom context, and in terms of the skills/output that we want students to attain. To this end, we use as wide a range of materials as possible; anything that aids comprehension is useful, whether visual aids, videos, music, examples, or drama. The materials and input provided (whether written or spoken) is often a notch or two above the learner's 'level'.

Three key factors that enable the use of extensive input and exposure are:

- Top-down processing: Learners use their wealth of existing background information to help them understand the meaning of the input and develop expectations about what they will read and hear.

- Language in context: Learners are exposed to whole, extensive pieces of languages rather than isolated words. Learners use a variety of texts, with the tasks adapted according to their levels – the harder the text is, the

simpler the task should be.

- Repetition of familiar form and content: L2 learners cannot focus on both meaning and form simultaneously. By repeating the same or similar tasks, learners are more able to build on what they have already done, and communicate by reformulating words and grammatical structures more efficiently and fluently.

Strategy: Teaching language organically

The 'deep-end approach'

If the basic principle of language learning, as we take it, is to engage with a message, learners should be exposed to their L2 in an organic way, instead of a limited, single focus.[32]

We present language organically, integrating content, skills, and language work, in order to reflect more accurately the layered, interconnected, and complex nature of language, and the way it is used and learned in real life. In spoken and written language, we encourage and create an atmosphere in which mistakes are perfectly okay. Error correction tends to have the immediate effect of putting students on the defensive. In the medium- to

---

[32] Willis, J. and Willis, D. (1996). Challenge and Change in Language Teaching. Oxford: Macmillan Education.

long-term, it can lead students to seek to avoid mistakes, avoid difficult constructions, focus more on the form and less on the meaning, or avoid contributing at all.

We correct grave errors in spoken English, or when polishing a text for presentation, and we correct written errors, where necessary, at the end of an activity, along with positive feedback. We seek to ensure that there are almost always more positive than negative remarks – we would rather students continue producing, with some errors, than that they stop wanting to produce. With time, most of our students' errors correct themselves. Furthermore, we typically have students begin producing and engaging with the material or content using their existing linguistic knowledge. This allows them to first produce with more spontaneity and immediacy before working with new language data and revisiting the content.

Strategy: Grammar teaching

Grammaring[33] and the 'deep-end approach'

Our approach to grammar takes the following principles: language acquisition is a natural, intuitive, and subconscious process. An awareness of *how* they are acquiring a language helps learners to advance their learning more independently as

---

[33] Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). Teaching Languages: From Grammar to Grammaring. Boston: Heinle

they grow older[34], and to facilitate this we are transparent about the activities we do, and open in encouraging practices that would help students. However, our primary focus is helping students develop the skill of 'grammaring' their output.

In our Bilingualism lessons grammar teaching plays a limited role. We don't expect our students to be concerned with fine points of grammar while they are speaking in free conversation, unlike most ELT methods, which encourage (even implicitly) limited early production via routines and patterns.

To achieve this, we position grammar less as a product and more as a dynamic process. 'Grammaring'[35] is the ability to use grammatical structures accurately: when we speak or write, we're always involved in using grammar. Instead of teaching learners a set of rules or a 'description of the language', we see grammar as a dynamic process. We don't 'transmit knowledge' through the teaching of grammar rules, we create communicative situations that enable students to use grammar structures unconsciously.

Consider the sentence "all gone milk," produced by a young L2 learner. Over time, basic utterances such as these are 'grammaticised', as they are in L1 learners, to produce more

---

[34] Krashen, S. (2009). First edition 1982. Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition. Web.

[35] Larsen-Freeman (2003).

acceptable forms such as "all my milk's gone" or "the milk is finished". In the classroom, the teacher will gradually 'upgrade' students' language, doing text reconstruction activities, self-correction, games, or dictogloss[36] activities.

We often engage with *form* using games, complex tasks, or hands-on activities. To allow students to associate form and *meaning*, we use real-world objects, videos, or situations, so that the form-meaning association becomes explicit. Finally, our students *use* the language in real-life situations, in classroom interactions (that make up the majority of the lesson time), and in relatively unrestricted role plays.

Strategy: Meaningful content and emotional wellbeing
Learners thrive if they have a practical goal for their language learning and use, especially when the goal is of personal interest to them. We strive to ensure our input is always relevant, engaging, and 'real', whether they're studying literature and beliefs from other parts of the world, local figures, ecosystems, or history. An emphasis on meaning, via communicative tasks and activities, allows students to acquire the features of the language both naturally and accurately.

---

[36] Dictogloss activities involve students listening to a text a few times, noting key words, phrases, or concepts as they listen. Students then work in groups to try to reconstruct the text in their own words, before comparing their final products to the original.

However, a key component of this success is the students' emotional state and their relationships with their peers and teachers. We seek to build a relaxed, non-pressured, yet energised and purpose-driven environment. This involves careful planning and continual re-planning within the lesson to (attempt to) balance students' needs, moods, and energy. Below is an outline of some of the techniques and components we use:

- Varied music, chosen to energise or to calm down, based on the needs of the moment.

- Videos, images, and participatory activities to aid retention and student engagement.

- Varying the tone and rhythm of the material, activities, and interactions to avoid boredom and passivity. It is easy to vary one and not the others, but this is unlikely to effectively refresh and engage students.

- Including regular movement and diverse social interactions (different nature, purpose, duration, and people).

- Always including a creative task, such as a story, a performance, a drawing, or a problem-solving task.

- Including tasks that span different learning styles:

  - Linguistic: written exercises, word games, reading, writing, etc.
  -
  - Logical-mathematical: grammar guided by discovery, problem-solving

  - Spatial: videos, illustration, project work, mapping, working with objects

  - Bodily-kinaesthetic: roleplay, drama, mime, yoga

  - Musical: listening to, singing, and creating songs, creating rhythms for stresses

  - Interpersonal: brainstorming and discussions in groups, competitions, team projects

  - Intrapersonal: visualisation activities, selecting their own tasks, independent reflection followed by

discussion

Strategy: Task-based learning

In our teaching context, a 'task' is "a meaning-focused pedagogic activity in which learners need to rely on their linguistic and non-linguistic resources in order to achieve a communicative outcome"[37] such as inferring meaning, conveying information, or expressing an opinion[38]. The language is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Therefore, the ultimate aim is the completion of the task, with whatever language the learners can access and use, rather than with specific language targets. We emphasise tasks that enable trial and error and creative thinking, with plenty of room for learners of different levels to identify and work with different parts of language.

If there is a language focus, it is introduced closer to the end, giving students the opportunity to redo the task or a similar one using the new/suggested language, and helping their peers to do so. Crucially, the language focus is often developed in immediate response to the students' work on the given task – their ideas, errors, needs, and abilities.

---

[37] Ahmadian, M.J. (2012). Task repetition in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 66(3), pp. 380-382. Oxford University Press.

[38] Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19(3), pp. 221-246.

PROJECT DETAILS

Buddy project

The Buddy Project began in 2017 when we noticed that some students were lacking confidence in their class. To help them realise how much they actually knew and could do, we asked them to help younger classes; we started with one buddy, and now have at least 10 at any given point in time. The system has turned out to benefit the students and teachers in more ways than we anticipated. Students (both from Bilingualism and from EFL) volunteer to be 'buddies', undergo an afternoon's orientation about their responsibilities, and are assigned a class based on their own age and competencies. Being a buddy is voluntary, and students consistently choose to remain buddies, suggesting that students have embodied the focus on responsibility, helping, self-confidence, and pride.

Buddies are expected to attend their assigned class as regularly as the class's students. Before the start of the lesson, the teacher usually briefs the buddy on the lesson

aims and what in particular they need the buddy to do. The buddy helps to prepare the classroom; conduct routine activities like arranging the circle, calling attendance, writing the date, etc.; keeps the students focused; guides them when they need physical or academic help; and assists the teacher in managing materials and movements.

Classroom spotlight

"With Violante, for example, we try to use her empathy, her high ability to communicate, to reach people, to connect with people, to help her with her lack of confidence. By being a buddy, she can feel she is stronger, she can help people, and that can help her to be more self-confident. She sees the results, she sees how happy people are when she helps them, and that gives her a sense of achievement. I don't know for sure if that's because of the buddy project or our work with her, but she's more eager to speak in front of people, perform, read out loud. She used to not like giving presentations or speaking in public or reading out loud. She also shows so much more enthusiasm in her lessons; she's ready to contribute and to help her peers who are struggling, both academically and personally/mentally. This year especially, she has played an important role in supporting a classmate who refuses to speak in the lesson. Violante has become her partner and her voice."

~ Melina Nestore

The buddies play a large part in fostering our school's culture, and put on different 'hats' according to the needs of the class in a given moment:

Buddy as a knowledgeable peer

In most classes, the buddy chimes in if they hear the students are not responding to the question. The buddy also demonstrates a game, activity, or action before students do so.

Buddy as source of input and routine

The buddy is often in charge of routine activities, giving students both a sense of familiarity and a source of regular input that differs from the teacher's.

Buddy as general discipline and support:

In a busy classroom, the buddy is the 'assistant teacher', getting students back to their seats or refocusing them, looking over students' work and answering their questions, and giving a hand when the teacher is occupied.

Buddy mentality

We have noticed that students who have been buddies take on the 'buddy' role of their own accord, with their peers as

well as with younger students. For example, during a combined School 1/2 and School 2/3 Phonics lesson, a Buddy from School 2/3 quietly helped a 5-year-old put up his thumb and be called on amidst the chaos of two classes.

Parents as buddies

While teaching online during the Coronavirus lockdown, we recommended that parents make a little 'buddy badge' like the ones the children have, particularly for the younger ones that rely on their parents' presence during online lessons. This signals to the children the nature of their parents' presence: as an academic, practical, and official helper, not their parent to give them hugs. It doesn't always work, but does its part to shift their mindset to being at 'school'.

Classroom spotlight

Altea, a six-year-old in School 1, is a buddy to other classes, and demonstrates buddy practices and characteristics in her own class. The first time I heard her spontaneously producing complete English was in telling off her peers: "stop it," "finished," "please," "listen to Mira". Perhaps most remarkably, other students, who did not otherwise independently produce in English and were not buddies, followed suit. It created a bit of momentary chaos, with five

students all deciding to be the teacher, but I was so pleased I let them enjoy their English-speaking power for a few minutes. She is always proud to say she's a buddy, and without being asked, she regularly takes on the role of getting her peers back in order, distributing or tidying materials, and helping a friend. During the weeks of online teaching due to the lockdown, she took it upon herself to be the one to explain the task to her confused peers, or to get them back in order. When praised for being such a buddy (even though no students are officially 'buddies' for their own classes), she laughed with a bashful toss of her head and went to retrieve her buddy badge.

Melina notes that, like our first buddy, many of our students with high emotional intelligence lack self-confidence, and at Creating Connections we have tried to address this through such students being buddies.

Classroom spotlight

One of our students has struggled with a decision to never speak English around other students, despite being one of our strongest students. Since becoming a buddy, she has been faced with situations in which, in order to do her job,

which she evidently wants to do well, she needs to speak to the students to help them, echoing instances where her own classmates want her to speak because she knows how to say things they do not. This is a work in progress, and the being a buddy may in fact not lead to her speaking, but it might give her a step towards being more confident in her abilities – and perhaps most importantly in her errors.

Classroom spotlight

This year, Ascanio has become one of our surprise star buddy stories – so much so that we have casually started using 'Ascanioed' as a verb to describe such a breathtaking transformation. Ascanio is highly intelligent, but was heavily affected by emotional struggles. He would coolly disobey almost every instruction, seek to create distractions, close himself in the bathroom in the dark to avoid participating, or simply cry. At 9 years old, this was a crucial moment in which he was still young enough to undergo a behavioural and attitudinal change, but on the brink of the pre-teen age where certain behaviours and feelings can become semi-cemented. After a meeting with his mother, his family implemented certain changes and greater attention at home; at school, his behavioural shift coincided exactly with his becoming a buddy. During the first week, in his own lesson he was still aloof; as a buddy he was slightly

impatient and disruptive. but ready to show his skills. In the second, he was agreeing to a task or activity after only a moment's resistance – still with reluctance, but with efficiency, and was quick to agree to bring his 'buddy' identity into his own class, to help his peers once he had finished. Shortly after, schools closed due to the Coronavirus, and he could no longer be a buddy, but by this point, his role and identity in his own classroom had completely transformed. He is now, much of the time, a leader in his group, able to negotiate his creative, spontaneous personality with his linguistic proficiency, his calmness with leading and helping his peers, and his ability to bring up boys in his class, whom he previously spent his time distracting, with patience and friendship. Between a changed dynamic at home, and greater responsibility and recognition at school, he's a new boy, and a joy to work with.

Mixed abilities

Our mixed ability classrooms involve being continually attentive, both in planning and in execution, to how an activity can be made accessible to all students. For example, in School 2/3, stronger students can be asked to spell a word from memory, or to come up with new sentences

themselves, while weaker students can spell by looking at a word, and need to work with prompts or sample sentences.

In School 1, although a student was unsure about moving to the next class, the gap between his abilities and the youngest had recently made the class too difficult to manage, and no longer beneficial for all the students. He has now moved to School 2/3, where he is now a fair bit behind the others' abilities to read, understand, and produce, and so will need support. School 1 is now far more balanced with students still learning basic language skills – so while one class has equalised, another will now need more attention. Mixed ability classrooms can in this way create immense challenges, but can also provide hidden benefits. The child who moved up a class is, now that he is no longer bored or frustrated by the more childish lessons of School 1, a more conscientious, focused, and calm student.

At times the 'challenge' context doesn't suit a student well. One student in School 2/3 was old enough and capable enough of joining School 4/5, but when he trialled it, he did not enjoy not being able to speak as well as the others. He chose to join School 2/3 and as a result his level has, to a certain extent, reached a point of stagnation. However, after

spending a year with School 2/3, he is now ready to join the higher level class, where he feels more motivated to learn and catch up.

We sometimes deliberately create an extremely mixed ability space, such as having School 4/5 and School 1 present to each other. In situations like these, School 1 feel proud and School 4/5 feel less intimidated by the act of presenting. School 1 don't understand the School 4/5 content, which perhaps aids in School 4/5 presenting more confidently. Although the School 1 content seems too simplistic for School 4/5, their participation in it sometimes serves to flag up misconceptions, knowledge gaps, and inattention.

For example, one Saturday we had School 1 present their costumes and School 4/5 present their learning about the Maya. School 1 was focusing on the present continuous, using "wearing":

Edoardo (School 1): "I'm wearing superhero glasses"
Patricia: "What is he?"
Giulia (School 4/5): "A superhero glasses!"

The second time around, the School 4/5 students answered correctly.

School 4/5: "A superhero!"

Patricia: "Why is he a superhero, what is he wearing?"

School 4/5: "Superhero glasses!"

A context like this allows the teacher to integrate the two topics and knowledge levels.

In a circle of School 1 and School 4/5, Patricia wears a mask:

Patricia: "School 4/5, what is this?"

School 4/5: "A mask!"

Patricia: "School 1, what am I wearing?"

School 1: "A mask!"

Patricia: "If I am wearing a mask, what am I? Am I a king?"

School 4/5: "No, you're a maya."

Alongside mixed abilities our classes have highly varied intellectual styles.

During a School 2/3 Social Studies lesson, Ascanio was asked where the Native Americans lived:

Ascanio: "… lived in North America… and…"

Ascanio was struggling to think of something more to add, at which point the teacher interjected.

Matias: "Native Americans lived in North America, full stop."

As the teacher was about to move on, Naoki chimed in.
Naoki: "No, it's not a full stop…"
Matias: "Why?"
Naoki: "Because the Native Americans lived in New York City."
Matias: "Ah yes, but New York City did not exist."

Ascanio was sometimes hesitant to answer, and often chose to disengage entirely. He wants to get things right, and therefore sometimes gets nervous when answering. Naoki is astute and quiet, observing, noticing, and remembering more than the others, and he is always keen to share it.

Mixed ability classrooms do often make planning, teaching, learning, and classroom management more challenging. In spite of this, mixed ability classes can also be concretely beneficial for both students and teachers. Firstly, they push teachers to constantly adapt to students' individual realities and needs, by researching new approaches and targeted material for each group of students. Moreover, teachers can collaborate with stronger students to 'mediate' knowledge and instructions to their peers, creating a collaborative

classroom environment, which has been fundamental for students' confidence and wellbeing. Being a small school in a rural area, we have small numbers. With small numbers, it is difficult to afford to pay enough teachers to separate all the classes by ability, if we can find one that wants to work in a rural area in the first place. However, this has given us the chance to experiment with and develop effective strategies for mixed-ability teaching, which could be implemented in other schools in similar contexts.

It is important to note that a lot of the management of a mixed ability classroom depends on good teachers, and teachers with a good relationship with the students. School 1 can be merged with School 2/3 for Phonics because Melina knows how to manage the classroom and has known the students since they were small, and the students, having had a long relationship with Melina, know, trust, listen to, and are keen to engage with her.

To sum up, despite the difficulties caused by the small number of students and the school's context, developing a mixed-ability pedagogy has helped us explore ways in which the emotional sphere affects students' learning, and how this can be targeted by harnessing the potential of mixed-ability classes. Our principal strategies are:

- Targeting the level of difficulty of the lesson not only to students' skills but also to their socio-emotional abilities. This can help students build confidence and self-motivate.

- Peer-to-peer collaboration – both within a group and across groups through the buddy project – plays a fundamental role in students' socio-emotional abilities and is a powerful learning tool.

- Encouraging 'weaker' students to look up to and learn from 'stronger' students, enabling greater engagement and learning than from 'one-way' teacher-student instruction.

Literature and yoga

The study of literature in Italian schools is notoriously sedentary, content-heavy, and memory-based. They study interesting texts, and a level of academic rigour is necessary in this context. However, the extent to which rigour and

assessment dominates their learning means many students emerge with a sense of dread and boredom with respect to the subject.

We had been using movement as part of learning for a while already, including activities such as online yoga storytelling, and general movement and exercise as part of the lesson. During the summer camp of 2018 in particular we used a lot of yoga practice, integrated into activities and stories, and it played a large role in helping the children to sit down, stay still, connect, calm down, and remain engaged. The *Rainbow Yoga for Kids* training is the only school-appropriate course accredited by the Yoga Alliance, which made it the perfect choice for advancing our teaching.

The integration of Literature and yoga, following Melina and Patricia's *Rainbow Yoga for Kids* training, was intended to reshape the students' perception of Literature, and make it a subject that they looked forward to at Creating Connections. Not every lesson involves yoga. The aim is to use yoga (in this context, a combination of standard yoga poses, and general physical movement) to provide a kinaesthetic dimension to students' learning, boosting their engagement in the moment and providing a new world of neural connections with which to absorb and remember

what they learn. This taps into the fundamental integration, both in terms of comprehension and in terms of brain structure, of movement, gesture, and learning, whether linguistic or otherwise (Jensen, 2005; Willems and Hagoort, 2007; Kelly, Manning, and Rodak, 2008).

Many of the stories involve animal characters, providing an opportunity for acting out the animals, understanding their characteristics and movements. Other times students work through the story using movement as the teacher and students tell the story orally, so that by the time they read the written story, they already have a strong sense of the material in front of them, and are ready to produce their own work about it.

Note for parents

During the Covid-19 lockdown, we were forced to change our Saturday morning assemblies, and yoga was the most natural replacement. With its calming benefits, its ability to transport one outside of the current situation, its accessibility, and, with integrated online yoga storytelling videos, we were able to create half an hour where parents, students, and teachers used yoga to 'tell' a story together. If you are entirely new to yoga, we recommend using Cosmic Kids videos on YouTube as a starting point to spend some

time with your children working through a story. A story gives children an anchor in an activity that requires significant patience and stillness. If you are already familiar with yoga, we encourage you to use known poses (and take inspiration from yoga story videos) to construct your own yoga storytelling with a familiar story. Involve your children in creating the poses: choosing which ones are appropriate for the character/action/scene, which ones they feel comfortable doing, or could do with some practice.

Full Immersion and Summer Camps

For many years we have been organising summer trips to English schools in the UK, where students attend classes and often stay with host families. The costs of the schools and flights, however, make the trips prohibitively expensive for many families. Other families are not comfortable with sending their children away for a week or more to another country. The 'Full Immersion' weekends became a way to bring the trip to the students: for two days, the school moves to an agriturismo, students arrive with their 'passports' to 'travel' to England, and students spend the time speaking only English while participating in projects and activities indoors and outdoors. Over the years we have expanded the 'location', and last year the immersion in an

English-speaking place became a weekend 'in India'. Summer camps are at least a week long, and are more active and flexible, but always in English.

The Book Project

Creating Connections has always had a small library, and from assemblies to Literature, Language to Social Studies, dialogic reading strategies have been integral to our teaching. In 2020 we decided to cement this in dedicated reading time, a structured library programme, and reading diaries.

Library

The books at the school are organised into sections by level and colour-coded, starting from pre-reading books at level 0 and moving upwards to novels for fluent adult readers. Students are given an overview of the organisation, told where to find more books of a given level around the school, and how to borrow a book. Our library is located in a corner of the main reception. With a small bookshelf, a foam mat base, and a couple of stools, it has quickly become a 'reading nook' where students, regardless of the busyness of the corridor and reception, huddle alone or in small groups before and after their lessons, pulling out books and talking. To encourage students to use the library

more autonomously, we initiated a 'book buddy' programme. Our youngest book buddy is 6 years old, and our eldest is 11. Their role involves monitoring the library during their slot, taking a book to be logged in the library software when a student wants to borrow it, recommending books to their peers, and helping younger students to read, where possible. As teachers, when we identify a book that we think a student might like, we drop a little note in their cubby with the recommendation.

Reading diaries

Each student who borrows a book is issued with a 'reading diary', a familiar concept in British schools but less so in Italy. Whenever a student reads with a teacher or parent, the date and book are logged, along with brief comments from the adult on how the student read, their interest, successes or challenges, and responses. There is similarly a column for students to add their comment – ranging from younger students simply drawing an expression, to older students writing independently.

Reading sessions

Students take turns to spend 15 minutes reading in pairs before or after a lesson. The books are usually chosen by the students from the library, but they can also bring English

books from home. The premise of the sessions is straightforward: students take turns to read out loud from the book, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. The teacher corrects pronunciation at the end of a paragraph/section, or in the moment if a student is struggling; answers students' questions; coordinates who reads; and asks occasional questions – comprehension questions are used only to help students when the text is difficult, and opinion questions prompt discussions and inputs based on what they read. Some students are immediately keen to read and also comfortable readers; others are keen to read but are not strong readers; still others are neither, and we have to choose books carefully that will appeal to them and get them engaged.

The reading sessions became particularly important, popular, and effective during the COVID-19 school closure; students were missing social interactions at school and the reading sessions gave them the chance to have 15 minutes with their peers. Furthermore, in whereas in person it is difficult to properly share a physical book between more than 2-3 students, the ability to share the screen online allowed more students to join in. Finally, with no parents waiting at the door to take children home, the post-lesson

reading sessions could extend as long as the students wanted to read.

Classroom spotlight

In School 4/5 an unexpected reading pair has emerged during the online reading sessions. Alex's mother speaks fluent English and reads regularly in English with him and his sister, making Alex a confident reader with fluent expression, ease with new words, and highly accurate stresses and intonation. Alice does not read often with her parents at home, neither in English nor in Italian, and has a tendency to rush through words as she reads, missing pronunciation, enunciation, and expression. Alex is relatively quiet and distracted in lessons, and there had been little opportunity in the year to notice his reading skills, while Alice is bubbly and always keen to participate. For two months, they were often the only two students to come to their class's reading sessions, and they even asked for additional sessions on holiday days, or after the school year had ended, to finish the book we were reading. Alice's reading has improved by leaps and bounds – she still makes some small errors when she rushes, but her attention, meter, and pronunciation have gone from being nonexistent to being strong and enjoyable to listen to. Alex listens patiently, never making Alice uncomfortable, and is friendly and ready to help Alice with a

pronunciation or a definition. Their contrasting energies make the reading sessions thoroughly enjoyable, and they're already thinking about what books they want to read in the new year.

A note for parents, teachers, and school leaders

Reading time is one of the simplest and most worthwhile things you can put in place, whether at school or at home. The key is to *keep* it simple: it shouldn't become a 'task' or 'work' for the parent or the child. Some factors to keep in mind:

- It does not take a lot to make a library. Our 'library' is a 1.5 metre squared corner, with a small, low set of bookshelves. However, students know exactly where to look within the library, they know they have full permission to explore and that no one is forcing them to choose certain books, they know they can stay there in their free time, and they know they can pick up a book and take it home in under 5 minutes.

- 'Comprehension' questions are to help, not to test. Ask questions if the paragraph just read seems like it might have been tricky, or if a student looks unsure

about it. The question helps you know whether the students have understood and, if not, *where* their misunderstanding is, so that you know what to clarify, rather than simply recounting what happened. As a teacher, this helps also you identify new vocabulary or constructions that caused the misunderstanding.

- 'Level up', but don't pressure. In almost all of our reading sessions, the books are technically 'above' students' current 'level'. For second-language readers this is particularly important for engagement, as reading within their 'level' can often leave them with books that are too simplistic or childish in their content. It is also important in terms of acquisition: through more challenging books, we expose students to new vocabulary and constructions, working through their uncertainties, but allowing them to develop confidence with new, unfamiliar language. This is where it is especially crucial to actively steer away from any sense of 'assessment'. Students are venturing out of their comfort zone and it should always be clear that this is purely for the enjoyment of the book, not to test or embarrass them. For this reason, students should also be allowed to choose

their books without pressure to take something more difficult. If a student is a hesitant reader, or is keen on a certain book, start with the books the student chooses, getting them comfortable in the environment, and then nudge them towards a more challenging book with similar themes or styles to the ones they chose. Again, you are reading for enjoyment and company, not a test.

- Work through pronunciation errors at the end of a paragraph, rather than interrupting the child as they read, unless they are struggling to move past a particular word. In the latter case, work phoneme by phoneme to help the student read the word fluently, then continue. Continual interruption breaks the student's flow, can hamper their confidence and willingness to read, and ruins the enjoyment of reading, both for the reader and the listener. When correcting, choose only the most 'important' errors to address, i.e. those that are far off the mark, or inhibit comprehension.

- Respond. When reading with children, you are part of an activity together – just because you are not an 'assessor' does not mean you are a passive listener. Respond to their reading with praise, express your interest in the book, ask questions, make jokes with them, and work through reading challenges with them. On a socioemotional level, this is a crucial time for forging relationships with you and with their peers – understanding how to listen actively, how to respond to and appreciate others' reading and contributions, how to participate in a debate, and how to engage their listeners. For parents, this can play a pivotal role in fostering healthy family bonds and relations. Fettig et al., in their study[39] of the role of dialogic reading socio-emotional learning, suggest that dialogic reading (similar to shared and interactive reading) "provide[s] the opportunities for young students to learn SEL skills and become intentional in their use of social-emotional skills to effectively navigate challenging situations and experiences."

---

[39] Fettig, A. et al. (2018). Using dialogic reading strategies to promote social-emotional skills for young students: An exploratory case study in an after-school program. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 16(4), pp. 436-448.

Socio-emotional learning

Strategies for socio-emotional behaviour/learning

At Creating Connections we do not actively teach students about socio-emotional learning, but an awareness of their socio-emotional dimensions, and the importance of emotional intelligence, permeates the way we teach and interact with the students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Yoga in assemblies and in Literature, the buddy project, reading sessions, and engaging with news, documentaries, and real-life, current global perspectives all form part of our daily approach to socio-emotional learning. Activities and tasks like these give students quieter moments to pause and recognise their and their peers' presence in the classroom, to practise how to listen and discuss, to engage with complex issues and diverse perspectives, and to articulate their stance, feelings, or experiences.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to a person's ability to recognise and identify emotions in themselves and others, respond to these, and use their knowledge to influence their thoughts and behaviour. Parents in the area are not often familiar with the concept of EI, and at Creating Connections

we have held workshops introducing parents to what it means and why it is relevant for teaching and learning. It is important for teachers to recognise when a student's indolence and insolence originate from a dislike of the teacher, a sense of inadequacy, or a frustration with external people such as parents or school friends. As such, teachers choose how to direct their response to the child, and how to plan for the following lessons. We are not professional psychologists or therapists, and for this we work with our school psychologist. But we are educators who spend a great deal of time with our students, and often have seen them grow up from the age of 3 or 4.

During a lesson with our School 6/7 class, all pre- or early teens, an often emotional, distracted, and frustrated student had caused a disruption in the class, releasing his anger about a relationship on his peers. This is not something he would reveal to them or to his teacher, but after repeated negotiation and conflict with the teacher, he was sent out to speak to Patricia. A short while later they returned, and Patricia knew everything about the relationship, the people involved, even as far as the student himself saying he felt upset that he had been hurt, and did not feel like working, and as a result had chosen to make it difficult for everyone else to work. As with much of Creating Connections, this

aspect, too, owes a great deal to the students having a comfortable and long-standing relationship with the teachers who have been around since the students were young. We spend time with the student and parents when we notice a problem, or when parents come to us with a problem the child is exhibiting in mainstream school, if not at ours. A combination of talking, drawing, individual sessions, and sessions with the families has typically produced positive changes.

That said, there are certain students for whom the school's support is not enough in the long run. It is a 'band-aid' for the day, and perhaps something that might support the student in their wider interactions, but insufficient for addressing the root of the problem, and for this external help is necessary. In some cases we have successful ongoing relationships, in which the school teachers, psychologist, and the family communicate regularly to share how a child has been in each environment, actions that have been taken, and any consequences or results we observe. In others, however, where the involvement of one party is limited, absent, or misguided, our chances of providing long-term change are slim.

Emotions in the Bilingualism Project

"Well when you spoke about emotional intelligence I was thinking how emotional the bilingualism kids are, but then I also realised that we get to know the bilingualism kids well. In the other classes, the classrooms are so controlled because we have other objectives, we don't get to see their emotions revealed so much. I also think that the bilingualism classes are more open to emotions, it's not just the time we spend with them. The way we study, the depth with which you study topics, that allows for more emotions."

~ Melina Nestore

Classroom spotlight

With School 2 we did "can," and we also did present simple and present continuous, and these are topics that we have in the EFL courses as well. For EFL we'll stick to the textbooks, i.e. "the characters can/can not do this and that," "can they…?" etc. But with the Bilingualism Project we don't stick to the textbooks as much. For example, with them, after explaining the meaning and form of "can," I had them make a list of things they can do and can't do yet. There was a little bit of frustration at the beginning, especially Naoki, because he said he wanted to ride his

bicycle for I can't remember how many kilometres, and then we added the "yet," and I don't know, there was some personalisation, some reflection on what they still have to do, and suddenly the "yet" became "wow possibilities".

In the Classroom Spotlight above, Melina talks about how the simple grammatical construction "can" became an opportunity for students to reflect on and share the possibility of new learning, skills, and abilities. Following the exercise, each student read out their list to their partner, and then read out their partner's list.

Classroom spotlight

"We had a similar outcome with present continuous and present simple. I told them I had written a book, *Melina's Unusual Day*: on each spread there was something I usually did, and then, because today was an 'unusual day,' the next page had what I was doing that day. For example: "Usually I eat breakfast in my apartment, but today I am eating breakfast in a treehouse."Without really explaining the difference between present simple and present continuous, they understood the model, worked excellently, and wrote their own books. I don't know if they realised it, but they wrote really well. Annarita wrote about wanting to spend

time with her grandma, indirectly. She said "I usually play with my dolls but today I am playing with my grandma," so I told her she needs to play with her grandma. Maybe at this age kids don't recognise the emotion, but the emotion is there in the book, because she has drawn herself playing with her grandma. I think these are the ways in which the Bilingualism Project lends itself more to emotions, opening up to them, addressing them, allowing them to be present."

~ Melina Nestore

Working with individual children
Much of the socio-emotional aspect of the Bilingualism Project comes out in our initiatives with individual students.

Classroom spotlight
Margherita, 10, has for two years refused to speak in her lessons. She speaks Italian outside of the lesson, and occasionally English, and is comfortable speaking English if recording something to submit, but never in person in the lesson. It has taken a year of concentrated work, first with Patricia and Margherita engaging with the pets, then sharing a small diary in which they wrote about their weeks and what they felt, and finally sessions with the psychologist (weekly with Margherita and monthly with her mother, who identified some of the root causes in the family context), for

Margherita to begin articulating some of what she is feeling. In a drawing exercise with the psychologist, she eventually said that she is afraid of being judged by her peers, and is nervous about being sat next to certain students whom she finds intimidating. This has not resolved her partial mutism, but her own recognition and articulation of what she feels is a crucial start to addressing the problem.

One child, who is 10 at the time of writing, has more personality and emotions than he can manage. The result has often been outbursts of frustration, energy, excitement, desire, or other emotions in the middle of the classroom, that made teaching and learning challenging for himself and for others. With him, the aim of our work was to give his originality a certain structure, while always encouraging him to respect his originality, to do more, to explore more, to create more.

Classroom spotlight

Last year we had an imaginary dragon, and the dragon was his outlet for his emotions. I had to keep returning to this, because his inability to express his emotions in an appropriate way was annoying the whole class; we had to stop the class, because someone had taken his pencil and he was sulking and crying, and we couldn't do anything.

Between me and him we invented an imaginary dragon who was always next to him, and every time he was disappointed he would pat the dragon to calm him down. We also created the opportunity to draw the problem and put it aside. We tried a lot of different things with him and this year he's a different boy. He still has a lot of emotions and personality, he's a big character, but he knows how and where to direct his energy now. I don't know if it's just because he grew up, but we had a lot of trouble with him a couple of years ago, and today he's a stronger member of the class. He's a reflection of high emotional intelligence because of the progress he has made. This is different from students like Violante, our first buddy, who is already naturally aware of how to express her emotions, and how to use them to connect with others.

This last Classroom Spotlight opens up the discussion of some of the challenges that come with the socio-emotional aspect of the Bilingualism Project. There is a particular set of factors that come together in the project:

- Spending several hours at school, getting comfortable with the teachers and their peers

- Often having grown up with the same peers and teachers since they were young

- A more playful and active classroom, more free relations, and no institutionalised 'disciplinary' system

As a result, while students have the opportunity to showcase more curiosity and individuality, and to develop their socio-emotional intelligence with each other, they also tend to showcase more behavioral issues and conflicts, compared with our EFL classes.

Showing empathy and care in response to students' behaviour has often helped us with students, with conversations such as, "I noticed you are not feeling very well, would you like to tell me why? Is it…? Do you want to tell me…?". We also recognise that students have different learning styles, attention spans, and abilities, and try to tailor alternatives, activities, and extra tasks around their individualities. Students at this age do not always recognise the meaning of this, and often their emotional responses/frustrations still interfere with their engagement, but our aim remains to maintain the effort regardless.

We hope to help students whose emotional frustration is interfering with them expressing their intelligence. In some instances, showing that we care, whether by talking or by creating work specially for them, helps students to take responsibility for their behaviour and learning, but we always need external professional help and support from the parents.

From time to time, there are students whose challenges are noticeably related to traits and tendencies of their parents. Being a small community, with students who have been coming for years and from a small pool of villages, one soon learns about the nature or background of a student's family.

Classroom spotlight

Sveva is intelligent, she generally knows how to direct her emotions, and she knows she knows things – she is one of the youngest and strongest students in her group. But when she is really sure or proud that she knows things, she sometimes shows it in socially negative ways; she needs to learn how to share, not show

She also struggles when she doesn't know something: she cannot make a mistake, so she just blocks – either doesn't try, or gets overly frustrated or upset, but she's working on it, and her family is working with her, collaborating, talking

to her. When we see she's getting frustrated with something, and getting angry at herself, we tell her that if she calms down, she can think better.

She's a perfectionist, as is her mother, and I asked her mother to make an effort to make mistakes at home and allow her response to convey, "ah well, I made a mistake, but it's okay." Sveva has improved a lot since last year.

A note for parents and teachers

It is all too easy for children to take behaviours, responses, and tendencies, aside from genetically, from their parents. Particularly when a behaviour is relatively inconspicuous, such as everyday perfectionism, it can be difficult to notice a child's adoption of it, and even more so to notice its effects on their learning. Behaving in a certain way in order to counteract this can feel contrived, but just as children pick up on one's natural behaviour and signals, a well-managed behavioural shift in their parents or teachers can signal a shift in their children. We encourage parents and teachers to communicate, to ask each other about traits that the child displays at school and at home, and to look to themselves if one of these traits is posing a challenge for the child. Teachers' behaviour, especially when students and teachers have a close relationship, has an effect on students' just as parents' does.

We have recently begun collaborating with the parents of a student who was frequently showing behavioural and emotional issues. This is helping us to know if anything positive or negative has happened at home, allowing us to be more prepared or understanding of what is happening at school, and helping the parents, who have tended to be absent from the child's learning time, to know when the child is behaving positively or negatively at school, enabling them to discuss more knowledgeably and praise more regularly.

A note for parents, teachers, and school leaders

We sometimes find that parents are not aware of just how much they can do with their child, regardless of how much or little English they know. "The problem is when parents think they cannot make it, cannot help their children, and that's where I think they need a course, to learn the different ways in which they can help their children," says Patricia. A couple of years ago we held a workshop in which we gave parents activities and then considered how they felt, to give them an idea of what their children might feel, and give them a sample of what we do at school: experience, then explanation. Workshops to help parents recognise what they can do can involve:

- Reading techniques: How to approach reading with their children

- Conversation prompts and techniques: How to approach discussing their everyday, as well bigger issues or conflicts

- Technology: How to use technology to help their children with their work

- Homework: How to help their children study even if the parents do not know English

- Socio-emotional learning and intelligence: Understanding these concepts and how to use them in their interactions and work with their children and wider family

A note for school leaders:

As both a school head and a mother I want to help my students and their families as much as possible. Being a teacher in addition means I am often in the classroom, but we have made recent structural changes to allow me to be at the reception with the parents more often, because that's

what I think a headmaster needs to do. I'm spending more time participating in our psychologist's initiatives with individual children, speaking to teachers, communicating with parents regularly in person and on the phone, not only about issues but also about general work and progress. The workshops in our 'school for parents' are giving me an opportunity to share with parents – while I don't have all the 'knowledge', I have the experience, and I continually complement my experience with reading and taking courses. It helps to say, "I read this book, I learned a lot from it, and I want to share it with you," because parents feel that I am not just speaking from myself, but through a book, through someone with more established knowledge than me, and it opens a door for parents to read the books and discuss it.

That said, there is a particular benefit of talking to them as a mother. Firstly because parents understand that you are a parent like them, and that you are speaking from experience both as a mother and as a teacher, sharing your mistakes and your learnings, rather than 'showing off'. I share what I see as a parent, as a teacher, and as a school head, and what I would advise from each of those positions, and tell them to put them together. Secondly, I remind them not to lose sight of the fact that I will never know their children as

they will, and to trust their knowledge of their children, as their mothers.

~ Patricia Natalicchio

Confidence building

Most schools seek to foster their students' confidence, so our doing so is nothing entirely new. However, in this section we will outline the means by which we try to do so, using some concrete examples to help influence your own practice. Drawing on *Seeds of Confidence: Self-esteem activities for the EFL classroom*, a book and course that Patricia attended, we outline our practices under five key components of self-esteem. These practices are elaborated in the sections that follow ('peer-to-peer support', 'constructive conversations', 'challenges', and 'discipline').

Security

Two key factors in creating a sense of security at Creating Connections are the 'rule' from day one that mistakes are perfectly normal and okay, and the absence of a formal 'punishment' system. Students are not reprimanded or penalised for errors, by their teachers or their peers, and are actively encouraged to speak and write, regardless of their errors. Actions such as 'time outs' are taken on a discretionary basis. Students invariably are well aware of why

they have been given a time out, and return when they are ready to be fair, participatory members of the class. Time outs are always preceded and followed by speaking to a teacher in a conciliatory, collaborative manner, to find out what was wrong and what they need.

Identity

The project-based nature of our work, the small classes, and the holistic approach to learning mean students are continually encouraged and able to contribute independently. In a single lesson, Naoki might be contributing scientific facts, Ascanio might be relating an action to his breakdancing or his favourite supercar, Zoe might be talking about her family, Giorgio might be drawing or showing us something he built, Matilda might be talking about her pets, and Annarita might contribute her moral stance on the topic. Lessons do easily 'derail', but we get some of our most interesting conversations, dynamics, and insights from this liberty, and students know that their natures, preferences, and experiences are welcomed, respected, and responded to, both on a small level in everyday interactions, and more structurally in project work.

Belonging

For students who have been coming to the school since the age of 3 it is not difficult to feel a sense of belonging, but nor is it a given. We reinforce belonging every day: greeting students individually as they come into school and giving them hugs when they like; walking up to students during breaks to talk to them and remembering their hobbies, pets, families, or events; asking questions about their lives and thoughts, not only about school; and taking the time to recognise moments of upset, confusion, success, frustration, or happiness, and to experience them with the student.

Purpose

The majority of our work is student-led and teacher-facilitated. We will initiate an activity or a task, which then involves students' original contributions and teamwork to create something of interest, rather than simple 'fill-in-the-blanks'. These activities fit into wider projects with tasks or problems that students are trying to solve, meaning that each lesson throughout the year is structured by micro- and macro-purposes. On an interpersonal level, through our classroom management and through the presence of buddies, students are continually shown that they all have a 'purpose' to help their peers, whether we ask a student to whisper the answer to their peer who is unsure but wants to answer; send a student round to check their peers' work and

provide help; or encourage students to work together to find the answer in a discussion, rather than spotlighting a single student alone.

Competence

The flip side of accepting errors is encouraging successes. When students are spending their afternoons and Saturdays learning a new language, with ways of learning and working that are different from their mainstream school, and with projects that require them to give their whole selves to what they create, it is crucial to explicitly show students that we notice and value what they produce, not only linguistically, but equally how they behave with their peers, their originality, their effort, their listening and respect, and their thinking processes. This recognition can be verbal, on students' written work, or in the form of 'reward cards'. The latter were created to a formal, tangible recognition of a range of skills, such that each student in a class has at least one category in which they see themselves excelling, can identify where they need to improve, and can see their progress through collecting stars.

Classroom spotlight

In this classroom spotlight, Melina's approach to Giorgio's contribution is an example of supporting students' security and reinforcing their competence:

Mixed-ability situations, such as putting School 1/2 and School 4/5 together to demonstrate their work to each other, opens up a chance for younger children to develop their confidence with sharing their work, speaking in front of those who likely know more than they do. Where there is just one class, we teachers use our position of knowledge to create a supportive response. During a School 2/3 lesson early on in the year, Giorgio was struggling to articulate what he wanted to say. In instances like these, where he either cannot figure out how to say something, or has feels ignored, Giorgio becomes susceptible to shutting down, with a downward spiral effect on the rest of the lesson. At this point, Melina said: "Wait! I think Giorgio wants to say, 'she can't drive a car yet,' Can you say...?" Melina said each part and Giorgio repeated. Melina used this as an opportunity to reinforce what each student wants to do and can do, and allowed them to correct her – either through making deliberate mistakes, or when she misunderstood what they were seeking to say. "

In this classroom spotlight, Naoki's readiness to help reflects a common purpose we seek to instill in all our students: to help each other contribute and do better. Ascanio's nervousness and Matias's response illustrate the acceptance of errors and uncertainty as important factors for students' sense of security:

Ascanio is another student who, like Giorgio, had a tendency to allow his lesson to disintegrate if he lost his focus, mood, or confidence. He often destroyed his work, destroyed stickers of praise, or insisted on how bad he thought his work was. During a School 2/3 Social Studies lesson, Ascanio was trying to explain a rule in a game ("say the correct sentence if Matias's sentence is false"). He couldn't complete the sentence and began to laugh nervously, but the class was still patiently listening. Naoki had tried to help but Ascanio told him not to, determined to get it right, but on his own. Matias could tell that he knew the rule, so he asked him how many points you get if you say the correct sentence and Ascanio burst out, "three!".

Peer-to-peer support

For young children in particular, one technique has proved effective for fostering peer-to-peer support. If a younger or less advanced student wants to/is asked to answer but cannot, while an older or more advanced student knows the answer, the teacher asks the latter to whisper the answer in the ear of the former, who then says it out loud to the teacher. The more advanced student gets the satisfaction of showing that they knew the answer, while the less advanced student gets the satisfaction of still having been the one to answer 'formally'. The same technique works equally well for students who are generally of the same level or age.

Constructive conversations

Whether between students alone, or between students and teachers, we try as much as possible to make conversations constructive, and arrive at answers collaboratively. Below are a few dialogues taken from lessons:

School 2/3 Social Studies:

Teacher: The Native Americans used arrows, but they did not use spears. True or false?

The class knew it was false but no one volunteered to give the correct sentence (except Naoki; to whom the teacher said, "I know you know")
Giorgio *(a generally shyer and less confident student; it's uncommon for him to volunteer to answer)*: Native Americans is... the... arrow and spear"
Annarita *(far more confident and a regular contributor)*: Native Americans use the arrow, also the spear

School 6/7 History and Oracy:
During these two hours there was strong discussion on the tables about how best to formulate the sentences.
"we put moreover because..."
"no, no, it can't be "moreover" because…"
"do you have all the 4 points?"
"no no you don't have to write like this because we have to discuss the conclusion"

Cristiana *(a strong student, though struggling at first to find an answer and to produce)*: I don't know how to say it... they changed the... I don't know how to say it...
Teacher: Is it about medicine, or?
Cristiana: Clothes, the material, I don't know how to say it
Teacher: Can anyone help?
Filippo: Cotton!

Cristiana: The other

Filippo: Wool!

Teacher: What about it?

…

Teacher: So what did that cause?

Cristiana: The people were clean

Teacher: The people were cleaner because they could wash their clothes more often.

Challenges

I see that some people in the Italian Ministry of Education probably understand that socio-emotional learning needs to be covered, so they develop a project, but then they do not always train teachers, and if they do train them, they are so theoretical that teachers do not know what it means or what to do with it, because they haven't experienced it themselves. I feel like it ends up being a waste of time and money, with little output and results. Some teachers think that working on soft skills is a waste of time, and when teachers are not confident in something they are not able to put it into action. That's a big part of the reason why we deal with so many issues here, because the kids come from school so stressed, and so strained by the system that destroys them emotionally. We're not only teaching English,

we're teaching and handling so many things, in order for the children to be able to learn here.

~ Patricia Natalicchio

Discipline

We have no fixed 'punishments'; we never accept negative behaviours, but that doesn't necessarily mean we necessarily punish negative behaviours. We recognise them, acknowledge them, we say that it's not okay. There are no detentions, sanctions, or similar consequences; the 'punishment', where needed, is typically not being able to participate, whether for 5 minutes or a lesson. If needed we have a one-to-one meeting with the student, usually after class, or ask the student to see Zuleika the psychologist after class. When there are students who continually disrupt the class, they are sent out to wait outside the classroom, until they are ready to participate with their peers, but we always start with the idea that there's something behind the bad behaviour that the student needs to talk about, so we do our best to address this outside the classroom. Our discipline seeks to strike a balance between recognising students' challenges and trying to address them, and not allowing them to get complacent.

Two years ago with School 6/7 there was the traffic light system; we didn't do it last year because they were used to it and I think they needed something new, so by now we could do it again. Everyone had their name on a popsicle stick. Every time they misbehaved in a certain way they would move up the traffic light. If they reached the red, they would have to have a 10-15 minute talk with the teacher after the next lesson, and based on what happened the teacher would prepare an activity for the student to do to reflect on what they had done. For example, if the student had behaved disrespectfully, it would be an activity on respect. The kids enjoyed it, I remember Filippo was keen to have his activity session times.

For younger kids, we have a session with them, without necessarily telling them that we're telling them off, for example, with showing them two types of behaviour or activity, the playful kind and the harmful kind. Sometimes we prepare a challenge sheet/monitor book for them; it doesn't always last long as a technique, so we have to keep reworking what we do.

Particularly with School 6/7, the older students, we are stricter about them taking more responsibility for their

actions, because they are old enough to recognise what is respectful and what isn't, what is appropriate and what is not. I don't know what happens on Tuesdays, but often they simply don't know how to work. Matias wants to change the activity to adapt. We do that with all our classes, recognising that a lesson plan is just that – a plan – and it can be counterproductive to force a plan when the reality is steering you in another direction. We do it especially with the youngest children, whose attention spans and moods are variable and harder to change. But with older students, if you consistently change the activity purely because they refuse to work, they will never learn how to work, and you have to find a way to continue, broadly, with what you planned and have them learn.

For example, if students are working in groups, and group 2 is not working, then group 1 presents, and when it comes to group 2's turn, they cannot present, they feel bad, they get peer feedback that affirms that they would have done and felt better had they prepared, and then, ideally, they improve for next time. Their teachers are getting angry with them at their mainstream school, but they accept it far more when they hear reproach from their peers.

Finally, along with in-class monitoring systems (like the traffic lights), sessions with the psychologist when needed, time being sent out of the class when they are fundamentally uncooperative, and steering them towards understanding that they need to learn to participate maturely in the lesson, we have an ongoing diary project with them. Through good lessons and 'bad', time-outs and individual sessions, we need them to know that we want to work with them in their best interests. We also need to know more about them as people – even though most of them have grown up with us, their needs, problems, dynamics, challenges, and interests are changing, particularly as teenagers. The diary project meets all of these needs: it started by Patricia giving them little notebooks in which she had written a short letter to each of them, asking about their weeks, how they have been, and telling them about herself in turn. Students had regular time in the week to sit around the classroom and respond to the letters. It has become a way to maintain a connection and a balance amidst the busyness of both the teachers' and the students' weeks, and the ups and downs of classroom management. We have extended the diary project to certain other students as well, such as with the student who refused to speak – it allowed Patricia and the

student to share their experiences when talking something through was not an option.

Self-discipline

At some point during a School 6/7 History and Oracy lesson in this group the language switched to Italian but they changed immediately when the class quietened and they realised they were audible. On another day, one of our dogs happened to slip out of his room, and wandered into the School 6/7 classroom. Matias's initial response was that the dogs cannot stay – far too much distraction in an already excitable and distracted group – but the students insisted and, unexpectedly, took it upon themselves to be more mature and responsible than we had given them credit for.

This kind of approach to students' discipline is also reflected in the practice of giving each student a role when they enter the classroom, with certain tasks they have to carry out throughout the lesson. Roles might include being responsible for distributing and taking care of classroom material, being in charge of organising classroom discussions and turn-taking, and being responsible for noise levels and participation of all students in classroom debates. Another strategy that can be used is the one of dedicating one or two lessons to collaboratively writing the classroom rules, asking students to imagine what if would be like if

there were no rules in the classroom, and how this would feel.

With School 4/5, Melina has spent the better part of the year teaching them literature through yoga poses. For a short story, she gave them a collection of yoga poses, and guided them through developing 10 sentences that summarised the story. They were then left alone to choose 10 poses from the collection – one pose per sentence, and to develop their performance of the story. Teachers walking through the corridor saw Melina with her ear pressed against the door, grinning to herself at the sound of the boisterous and often Italian-dependent (though not by necessity) students working through their preparation in English.

Learning companions

In recent years, Panchito the dog has been a part of the students' day at school. In 2019, with the addition of Lio, the two little dogs gave rise to the 'learning companions' activities. This grew to include teaching children how to behave with dogs, to learn more about the animal-child

connection, and to help children to approach and handle their emotions.

"For the first part of last year, Panchi was always present during my Saturday warm-ups with School 1. They used to come early in the morning, sleepy, and they wouldn't speak, but if Panchi was there, I would tell them, "Panchi wants to know…" and that worked to 'wake them up'. Pietro, who was three or four, would arrive on a Saturday morning crying, but if Panchi was there he would start to calm down and participate. Panchito was not needed with School 1 after the first three months because by then they had realised what the start of the lesson entailed, such as the date, telling the teacher about themselves, and listening to instructions. That's how we got the idea of using the pets as learning companions, because we realised that talking to a dog was easier than talking to a teacher, whether to give them confidence or to wake them up. The instance of School 6/7's self-discipline mentioned above was a result of the dog's presence, and the students' desire to prove they were mature enough to handle it. As with the diaries, we extended the 'learning companion' concept to Margherita, who refuses to speak. The first time I met her to try to figure out her trouble, before asking a question, I started talking

about Lio – she has a Maltese, too, and this was our point of commonality."

~ Patricia Natalicchio

The pets' role at the school ranges from everyday comfort to teaching the children responsibility. When a young child is crying or refusing to engage, they are often taken first to see Lio or Panchi, and they respond more readily to petting, or even talking to, the dogs. They calm down and seek to comfort the dogs, while being comforted themselves.

In 2019 the dogs started going for training on Saturdays, and their trainer additionally specialises in sessions with children and dogs, the Bimbi e Cani sessions. Every Saturday children are chosen to be the 'dog buddies' that take the dogs down to the garden during break time. Given their eagerness each break time to be 'the chosen one', and their responsiveness to the dogs as comfort and companions, it seemed a natural step to get them involved in dog training sessions. Students started going in small groups on Saturday afternoons to participate in the training, which was often more for the students than the dogs. The sessions are premised on the similarities between children and dogs: their spontaneity, energy, activity, sensitivity to

moods and sounds, and need for support and connection. In addition to fostering childrens' relations with dogs, the Bimbi e Cani AgriDogs sessions seek to develop children's:

- Sense of responsibility

- Empathy

- Recognition and appreciation of difference

- Ability to invent and improvise

- Self-confidence

- Socialisation and collaboration skills

- Communicative skills, specifically non-verbal language

Their activities involved practising being more patient, recognising and responding to the calmness, energy, and moods of the dogs, and learning to adapt their actions and moods to meet a wider need. For example, during one session, students had to learn how to pass a treat around a

circle such that the dogs traced the required path around their bodies. Their keenness and excitement did no good, as the dogs became confused, flustered, and distracted. It was after extensive practice that students realised they had to be quiet, calm, and measured in order for the dogs to be able to follow. At the age of 10, when our students are practically bouncing out of their seats in a normal lesson, an afternoon being quiet in the grass and experiencing first-hand the effects was an entirely new form of learning for them.

As the dogs and children have gotten more used to being in each other's company, we have started letting the dogs play freely in the playground with the children during break time. Students are told not to approach the dogs to pet them, but to wait for the dogs to approach them, and to avoid touching the tops of their heads, so as not to frighten them suddenly. Dog buddies now do more than simply take the dogs downstairs. Students are learning that fun comes with responsibility, and have been taught to look out for the dogs' mess and tidy it up.

A note for school leaders

We have experienced first-hand the impacts of having animals around students, but we understand that not all schools have this facility. Some schools have small animals, such as guinea pigs, hamsters, or even snakes, that allow students to participate in looking after them. If animals cannot structurally be a part of the school day, we recommend incorporating projects and field trips that allow them to be part of the school year. It is possible to incorporate 'learning companions' through field trips, or inviting families to bring pets to school on designated days.

Whether regularly or as an occasional event, below are some of the strategies we recommend:

- Having animals as the first 'contact' when a child is upset, angry, or simply incommunicative, both in 'crisis' moments as well as in regular lessons

- Finding points of commonality between the child and the pet, such as an emotion, an activity, or an expression

- Where possible, having animals around students in a context in which students need to be responsible both for themselves and the animal's presence,

whether in a classroom, or in the playground

- Developing a project in which students research, write about, and present (as a magazine, a guide, a presentation, a documentary etc.) different breeds, species, needs, habitats, and ways of caring.

Alternative schooling

Around a year ago, while observing lessons at the local school, Patricia noticed a girl who was entirely lost, and after a while, made the decision to speak to her father, who happens to work next door to Creating Connections. She signalled that his daughter, who has learning difficulties, may be struggling and not learning, or even enjoying herself, at school. He followed this up, and a year later dropped by the school one afternoon. He wanted to thank her for what she noticed and said, and for what had come out of it: he found a farm school, where children with severe learning difficulties and different mental abilities can go instead of 'regular' school. They have their days structured around looking after animals, giving them a different way of learning and engaging, and importantly, the knowledge that they are capable and useful, which can be entirely absent from their experiences of regular schooling. Some of your

students may benefit from a similar change, while others, who are otherwise 'comfortable' in mainstream schooling, would benefit from learning about different ways of studying, learning, knowing, and participating in the world.

A note for parents

If you have pets at home, or have been considering getting a pet, take a moment to consider the responsibility it involves/will involve for your children – consider giving your children more responsibility, rather than less. Incorporate the pets into the house rules, the interactions, the tasks, and the discussions. If neighbours or friends have pets, see if you can make them a part of your child's routine, even if only slightly.

A note for teachers

If you do not have access to a pet/animal, a similar focusing and calming activity can be done with familiar materials. For example, having students pass a feather, handkerchief, pencil, or other delicate item around the circle in increasingly complex ways (on the palm of their hand, on one finger, behind their backs, over their heads, etc. The next step is to make the object imaginary, and maintain the same quiet and calm. Games like snap where students play in big groups and have to say the snapped person's name

also steer children to be quieter and more mindful, as their success in the game depends on being able to hear all of their peers and be heard.

Science and Art

Science and Art have a long, intertwined past. For most of history, before the relatively recent invention of advanced imaging technologies, the most common way to document scientific findings was, in some form, to produce the image by hand. In recent times, the importance of strong observation skills for scientific abilities has been recognised and implemented in different fields. From Ivy League medical students studying art to scientists in all fields seeking, and being driven by, the 'art' of science, the beauty and detail, there is a fundamental association that is present in the professional sphere, but easily forgotten in the classroom. In our Bilingualism lessons, students analyse both imagery and text to build their foundational lexical and conceptual knowledge.

As with most Primary Schools, at the centre of Science in the Bilingualism Project is children's engagement with the world. Furthermore, the concepts we teach often go beyond their standard school curriculum. Through our projects, and

without the obligation to cover an extensive list of topics, we have the ability to introduce students to more complex topics, and that too in context. For example, our current School 1/2 students are learning about food chains and the fundamentals of ecosystems, a topic that is rarely taught to students aged 5-6, but which supports their learning in the Val d'Orcia project. While older students in the project are learning about how the landscape has changed since the 1930s, the younger students are learning to identify local bird species, their relationships in their immediate environment, and their distinguishing physical and behavioural features.

Finally, Science topics are often integrated with a relevant story and always involve active physical engagement with the topic. This engagement always incorporates and/or culminates in something made by the students, such as a three-dimensional tool or a practical guide.

School 2/3 ended their rainforest topic with illustrating their learning. Using some images as references, the students divided their pages into grids, building on structural vocabulary such as foreground and background, layout and layers. Melina asked the students how the plants ought to look in each layer of the rainforest, and students, using their

learning from the topic, reasoned through how and what to draw. Students have to use their knowledge to reason and create their art, which in turn cements that very same knowledge by virtue of having reinterpreted it in a manual, novel way. The 'Val d'Orcia birds' project, in turn, involved students researching and producing a guide to the birds of the Val d'Orcia. Students learned the finer distinguishing features between birds by comparing images as they drew them, and tapped into their understanding of evolutionary traits as they identified and discussed *why* a given bird's beak has the form it does. Later, during an end-of-the-year pictionary game, one of the words was a 'bee-eater', a bird the students had studied. A student quickly pulled out the guide he had made, flipping through his illustrations to identify the bird his peer was drawing.

A note for teachers

'Scientific diagrams' are a part of any Science classroom, from at least as young as eight years old. They serve a fundamental purpose in the scientific method, and in extracting core concepts, mechanisms, and relationships. However, that very 'extraction' can, in some cases, deprive learners of their own engagement in, and observation of, other complex relationships and features. Compounded with the ease of finding images online, the commonness of

printers and photocopiers, and well-designed colour textbooks, spending time on drawing detailed images can seem a waste. As children get older and there are more and more concepts, with the pressure of exams and content to cover, it is understandable that teachers seek ways to streamline their materials.

Try introducing one detailed drawing per topic, either of your choice, students' free choice (anything from any topic), or students' choice within a section (e.g. a bird from the bird topic). It is particularly beneficial to include detailed discussions as students work, having them hypothesise, collaborate, and observe closely to answer, and for this reason, maintaining some commonality between the students' chosen drawings can be useful. Note their results in a topic test compared to other topics, or their classroom responsiveness and contributions. If you find positive results, or even just more interesting conversations and active participation, speak to your head of department about integrating more observational drawing in the Science curriculum and teaching methods.

Social studies

With teachers and students facing more and more pressure to perform well in examinations and testing, there is often

little attention placed on the development of critical thinking and creativity skills in classrooms. This can lead to teaching and learning becoming more and more mechanical, with the risk of having teachers 'imparting' rather than 'facilitating' knowledge development, and students being passive in the classroom.

Developing the Social Studies curriculum and classroom practices has been an opportunity for us to try to take students beyond knowledge accumulation and into 'knowledge construction'. Drawing from Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, we have built our curricula on a mixture of global and local knowledge, ranging from history to human and physical geography.

1	• Remember
2	• Understand
3	• Apply

4	• Analyze
5	• Evaluate
6	• Create
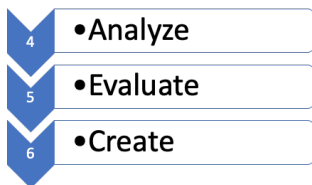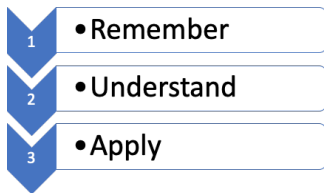
Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, developed in the 1950s[40]

---

[40] B.,Bloom (1954). Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals. Longman.

Bloom's educational objectives can be divided into two macro-groups, the first aiming at grasping the knowledge and applying it in tasks, and the second at being able to control and use this knowledge in creative ways. While the former group of skills is sufficient to perform well in examinations, it is the latter that enables a student to use their knowledge creatively and critically, and translate it into how they behave outside the classroom and understand the world around them.

In particular, we aim at developing students' ability to analyze, evaluate and create knowledge through project-based learning, as well as blending global knowledge and awareness to local knowledge and students' personal experiences.

Every new topic is approached by keeping students' ability to analyze, evaluate and create in mind. After a brief introduction to the lesson's topic, regardless of whether it is history or geography, the teacher asks students to look for ambiguity and controversy, in order to spark their interest in building their own opinion about it. This is done with two central aims in mind: first, to demystify the idea that all

knowledge coming from the teacher or the textbook is definitive and irrefutable, and second to help students develop the thinking tools they need to build strong and critical opinions.

Analyze

Students are asked to read through a text, watch a video, or look at some images. They are given the task to draw as much information as possible from them, brainstorming thoughts, ideas, or even single words onto the board. At a second stage, they are asked to think about the knowledge they already possess and find possible links. Different strategies are used to help students understand historical information, role-play or creative tasks are often used in order to make history feel more tangible to students. Moreover, since global history can sometimes feel distant and irrelevant to students, the teacher often asks them to find the links between what is being studied in class and their local environment.

Classroom spotlight

After reading a short text on India's partition (history), students were asked to come to the board and write down everything they knew about India: they immediately

connected this activity with their previous knowledge of the British Empire, colonisation, and trade between Asia and Europe. Moreover, they started thinking about what the term 'partition' might mean, leading them to the conclusion that some sort of separation was carried out in the country. They were then asked to think about ways in which their own country had been divided in the past, activating their historical knowledge of the topic.

Evaluate

Key to the study of history and geography is students' understanding of sources. For this purpose, the book is never the only nor the main source of knowledge but rather an addition to other types of material the teacher brings into the classroom. Students are asked to draw information on certain topics from online encyclopedias, photos, archival material, newspaper articles, films or even radio programmes. In order for them to be able to use these sources appropriately, the teacher guides students through a process of evaluating the sources, critically assessing who might have produced the source, with what purpose, and why it could be more or less reliable. This is done not only for the sources mentioned above, but also for the textbook

itself. We believe that being able to evaluate sources of information is a key skill that schooling should provide to children and adolescents alike, particularly at a time in which we are constantly exposed to hundreds of different and sometimes questionable sources.

Create

As a tool for developing critical thinking, as well as formative assessment, creative projects are at the centre of all of our social studies lessons. After analyzing and evaluating the knowledge in the first two steps, classroom activities involve being able to use sources and information to create new material and content. This can be done through activities such as writing new textbook material from scratch, an investigation and presentation on the links between the historical topic and current affairs, or preparing for an interview with some who has lived through an event. Moreover, the creation of new material is fundamental for the formative assessment of students' knowledge in social sciences. It can help students activate their knowledge of history or geography in tangible and practical ways, drawing

on this knowledge to understand and form their opinions on the world around them.

The creative phase lies at the centre of the Bilingualism Project, with the aim of pushing students to move away from what the teacher or the sources can provide them, and try to generate new ideas and thinking. This is all done collaboratively and with appropriate scaffolding by the teacher, according to the students' level and confidence.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: THE SCHOOL FOR PARENTS

Origins

"Throughout the journey of Creating Connections, parents have continually come to me for advice on problems or questions about their children. I started having regular communication with them in an attempt to raise their confidence and help them address the issues they faced. In many cases, the more we communicated, the more they came to talk, the more we talked, the better their children did. They started succeeding more and feeling less frustrated, which goes a long way, especially when it comes to learning a second language.

However, I also noticed that as time went by, my students became increasingly dependent on me, less autonomous, less responsible. I started asking questions about why this might be, observing my students and other children inside and outside school – in the street, at the park, at the supermarket with their parents. In some cases I noticed that parents were overprotective, such as doing their children's homework for them or correcting it before it was shown to the teacher. In some other cases parents did not participate in their children's schooling because they thought that schooling was the school's responsibility and not theirs. Some parents were extremely strict whereas some others were excessively lenient.

I believed that things could be better and so I started looking for a way to improve the situation described above. I wanted to know what, if anything, was more important in a child's education: the family or the school? If it was the family, what could the family do to help the child do better at school? And if it was the school, how could the school help the family help their children at school? The answer, of course, seems to lie in the integration of and collaboration between the two. After having read several books on child development, I decided to attend a course by Harvard

University called An Introduction to Family Engagement in Education. *This course helped me understand that as a school we need to engage families much more if we want to have responsible and independent students with greater flexibility to be able to face a changeable and challenging world. We already had a strong tradition of family involvement, and had had some workshops but this course was the catalyst for formally setting up our 'School for Parents' with the aim of empowering parents with specific actionable things they can do to support students' growth and achievement, both academic and personal."*

~ Patricia Natalicchio

In this section we summarise some of the key takeaways from the family engagement course, in the hopes of providing you with a starting point for your own reading and implementation. It is important to note that, even within the course, these are generalisations drawn from studies, and will not apply equally to all families. Always get to know your family contexts as individually as possible.

On the school, culture, and community
When schools build relationships with families that *respond* to their concerns and *honour* their contributions, and engage families in ways that are linked to improving

learning, these relationships are more sustainable and durable, with greater effects on students' achievements.

Caring and trusting relationships between schools and parents, as *partners* in their children's educational development, enhance parents' desire to be involved. Practices that help schools make a different through their family engagement include:

- Creating opportunities for parents to participate in the school structure, learn from their children, and model attitudes and approaches for their children; emphasising parents' participation as *people*, not merely as creators of costumes or attendees of events

- Focusing on building trusting, collaborative relationships not only among teachers and families, but also wider community members, inviting the community into the school, and taking your students out to learn from them

- Addressing the attitude and knowledge of the school staff so that they recognise the advantages of teachers and parents working together

- Actively respecting, finding out about, and working according to the families' education level, language, culture, and socioeconomic background

- Taking parents' interests and needs into consideration when planning activities

- Recognising that even if parents can't come to school, helping their kids at home is a valuable contribution

- Sending material home, such as newsletters or information booklets on how to be involved (e.g. how to help their children with homework)

Regardless of the action you take, treating your families with respect is paramount. Ron Ferguson from the Harvard Kennedy School expresses this clearly: "Everybody loves their children and when you're respectful in the way that you deliver information and support as well as advice, people want to know it, because they want to give their kids a good start in life." And perhaps the best illustration of this is from a mother herself, who asked us, "please do not come and tell me what we do wrong; come and tell us what we could

do to help our kids." Importantly, at Creating Connections we contact parents if there is an issue, but not exclusively. We make it a point to write to, call, or meet parents when we notice positive behaviour, changes, or strengths in their children.

On parents

Children do better at school when parents talk to them about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for university, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive. Part of the school's role can be to provide parents with knowledge and support to facilitate and complement the home sphere. Knowing they have the tools and network to back them up can increase parents' sense of efficacy.

Parents' sense of efficacy, the power to produce an effect, influences their involvement during elementary, middle, and high school. Parents have a higher sense of efficacy when they believe that they can:

- Help their children do well in school, be happy and safe

- Overcome negative influences and keep their children away from trouble

- Have a positive impact, such as improving quality of the school and the community

Different parents value different aspects of 'efficacy' to a greater or lesser extent. Developing an understanding of how a family sees 'efficacy' can help you understand their approaches to parenting and schooling, and even why a child behaves in a given way.

Workshops

The School for Parents is based on a fundamental principle that parents, school staff, and the wider community are collectively responsible for children's educational development. Establishing the School for Parents gave a formal environment and structure to our existing workshops, talks, and events. Our talks with experts include external educationalists and, where appropriate, parents that are psychology, education professionals. During the lockdown, we convened with parents online to watch parenting and education webinars together and then discuss them,

opening a wealth of topics, questions, and collaboration. Workshops are always developed as a synthesis of existing professional material, such as books and courses, school and personal experiences, parents' questions or needs, and parent participation during the workshop. Parents work through the materials with Patricia, using imagery, analogies, and examples to concretise theoretical concepts. Their activities are usually a combination of initial activities, to which they return to reassess later, team discussions and debates, and individual reflection. Below we outline the most recent school-designed workshops to give you a sense of their content and form.

Communication

This workshop took two books as its foundation: *How Children Succeed* by Paul Tough, and *How to talk so kids will listen and how to listen so kids will talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. The comics/illustrations in the latter proved highly effective working with the families. We put parents in groups, showed a situation, and opened a discussion on what they would do. We then used the book's illustration pairs: the images of what you 'should' and 'shouldn't' do, and discussed who would have done each one, before working through the theoretical groundings and justifications. A facilitated workshop environment, working

with other families, and the use of visual models helped parents identify their own practices, visualise an alternative, and work through theories that they may otherwise not have engaged with.

Responsibility and autonomy

Family involvement varies widely in its nature and effects at different ages and in different contexts. Each time I work with a child, I take extensive notes. I contact the family if necessary, but much of the 'extra' observations and information goes towards determining the next workshop topic. Months of sessions at school with children who were crying, acting out in class, and appearing confused by the different values they saw at mainstream school, at Creating Connections, and at home, revealed that there was an underlying issue in many children's responsibility and autonomy. Research presented in the family engagement course, too, highlighted the role of overprotection in inhibiting the positive effects of family involvement. We wanted to help parents identify signs of overprotection in their own practices and of restricted autonomy in their children.

The workshop was preceded by a questionnaire that parents filled out at home. Using the book *Come Fomentar la*

Responsabilidad (*How to Promote Responsibility)* by Jesus Jarque Garcia, parents had a list of abilities and responsibilities that children are typically expected to have at each age, on which they had to mark whether their children did or did not perform these. The first part of the workshop was more of a lecture than the 'Communication' workshop, as we worked through definitions of responsibility, characteristics and consequences of irresponsibility, evidence, and theories, such as from Lorenzo Braina's work. This was followed by small group work, in which each group read and discussed a story (one from the book, one from Patricia's personal experience, and one from the school). The ending of each story was missing, and parents had to imagine and share their predictions before being told how they ended. The aim of the questionnaire and the story activities was for parents to use the theories covered to reflect on their existing practices and assumptions, and identify reasons why and areas where their behaviour could change.

A final debate was supposed to be part of the original workshop, but we discussed so much that we ran out of time. This turned out to be a positive outcome, as following the workshop, parents' feedback – positive reflections, concerns, disagreements, and successes – flooded in,

making the preparation for the debate all the more interesting. The debate was led by two parents with the most critical and the most supportive responses to the workshop respectively. We want parents to know that we want to learn from them, and that conflicting views are always a welcome part of the school culture.

Future

We are currently 'building' our School for Parents and formalising our family engagement programme across the school structure. Our family engagement programmes are free of cost, except when an external speaker charges directly. Here's some of what we're doing, planning to do, or hoping to do. If you or your school implement any of the workshops above or any of the following ideas, we'd love to hear about your experiences.

- Parent buddies: several parents have expressed interest in being buddies (whether for a single turn or regularly), to understand what their children do, learn from their children, and model the 'community improvement' form of efficacy

- A lending Library that offers material to parents to help them build their knowledge and skills at home

- Hosting informal discussion groups with families about their children's learning

- We have been hosting workshops for our eldest students and their families to help them through the process of choosing their high school and their 'stream'; we'd like to extend this to workshops and guidance for families to support their children through critical transitions at all ages

- Developing the capacity of school staff to work with families through continuing professional development courses

- Creating a 'Val d'Orcia Education Agency', giving parents access to information, doing the research and synthesis they wouldn't or can't do, and then presenting it to them in accessible ways