

## Language Teaching in the Creation of a School Community.

(Presentation by David Nugent, M.Y.P. Coordinator, International School of Modena, Italy.

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The International School of Modena is a small school of 80 students, aged 3-14. The school was originally a Swedish school for children of the employees of a Swedish company. Later the Swedish school co-existed with an international school using English as the medium of instruction. We are now one school, with Swedish still taught to Swedish students, and are hoping to attract more native Italians. Early last year, we decided to emphasize the unity of our school by dropping the terms Middle School and Elementary School and referring to departments.

My presentation was built around three main themes:

1. Working together
2. Mother Tongue
3. Library

From the start, I welcomed questions, comments, and discussion.

At the beginning of the last academic year (2005-2006) we initiated a programme at the International School of Modena (I.S.M) whereby older students would work for one lesson per week with younger students. From the start, I insisted that this was part of their English programme; they were not simply “helping with the little ones,” although the nature of the lessons included a form of Community and Service.

The work done in the three classes developed differently. The youngest Middle Years students (grade 7 according to the U.K. system, aged 11-12) worked with grade 1 (aged 5-6). They helped the younger children to read, listened, read to them, and discussed what they had read. These children also wrote individual stories for their younger partners to read. Then they helped the little ones write their own stories.

Grade 8, working with grade 2, were required to do some preparation for homework. They studied plot structure and development of characters in order to help the grade 2 children write stories. It was especially with grade 9 working with our reception class (4-5) that things blossomed far beyond my expectations, thanks to our Early Years Coordinator and Reception teacher, Louise Lloyd. From Louise, our grade 9 students not only learned about the phonics system which they would use with the younger children but also learned about language acquisition. Louise wrote an evaluation of this work at the end of the year and it was decided that it would be included in the grade 9 school reports. In it, she wrote that “The older students were exposed to the enormity of teaching children to read and write which can be a daunting task... The tasks undertaken have also been explained in detail and the theory behind it taught to the older students.” Louise is able to communicate with these adolescents on their level but to project her teaching slightly higher although within their reach, helping them to grow and mature as people. In

working with the younger children, she did not simply set the tasks but rather entrusted them with responsibility.

Obviously, as well as being part of the English programme, this is also Community and Service and even more. I quote again from Louise's evaluation. "The wider issue of integrating older and younger students has had a calming influence within the school in general. It appears to be more cohesive with children of all ages appreciating the needs of all rather than the younger students fearing contact with taller, larger, and louder students. School life is a potentially intimidating experience for Early Years and Elementary students and fear of older children and the way they may be treated is an important aspect of pastoral care." By the end of the year, there was a lovely family atmosphere in our school. The younger children would wave and shout hello as older students went upstairs to their classes. On one occasion, two boys of 12 and 14 went to help and comfort a 6 year old who had fallen in the corridor.

This was also a positive experience for two boys who had no brothers or sisters. As they themselves pointed out, working with the younger children added an extra, enriching dimension hitherto absent from their lives.

The same applied to children with special needs. A hyperactive boy from Grade 8, unable to sit still for more than a few minutes in normal lessons, remained totally absorbed for 40 minutes every week, working with a little girl aged 7. Another boy with quite serious reading problems, although a lover of books, would listen to a younger student read, his own experience providing empathy and he himself gaining confidence from doing something positive.

One of our multi-disciplinary M.Y.P. projects was to produce a book about Discoveries and Inventions for grades 3 and 4 class library. Preparatory work included a visit to a local public library. Each student contributed an article written in English and the student's native tongue.

Last year, grade 7 wrote an evaluation of their work with grade 1 with reference to the Approaches to Learning and, this year, grade 8 has applied this work to the Learner Profile and Areas of Interaction. (During my presentation, I passed round these evaluations, the stories written for year 1 and the book of Discoveries and Inventions)

It must be remembered that most of these students are not native speakers. All students study English and Italian. The Swedish children have lessons in their own language with our Swedish teacher. A few also choose to have lessons in German.

Other non-native English speakers are catered for by our Mother Tongue programme, initiated by Matthew Thurston, now an M.Y.P. coordinator elsewhere in Italy, and now organized by our Italian teacher, Chiara Forti. We have students who study Finnish, Polish, Portuguese, Tamil, and Turkish. Some on-line programmes are used (in Finnish and Swedish) but most of the Mother Tongue lessons are taught by parents. Mother

Tongue is timetabled for two lessons per week: one devoted to reading literature of the home country and the other to language instruction.

Thus, there is not only an integration of several languages but also between home and school, professional teachers and parents, who if not qualified teachers themselves, have a highly educated background.

Our library also contributes to the creation of an integrated school community in two ways. Each term, we have a Library Week for the whole school. Of course, not all classes do the same thing but there is a common theme. This term our multi-disciplinary M.Y.P. project will be part of and a contribution to Library Week. Secondly, the library is fast developing as a focal point for all subjects of the M.Y.P. Our librarian, Jenny Almhojd, has devised a library “grid.” Students complete part of these in subject lessons; what have they learned about the topic and what they want to know. Teachers fill in another “grid” form to inform Jenny what skills (Approaches to Learning) they would like students to develop. Jenny then helps students to search, research and select appropriate information.

M.Y.P. requires communication with parents. This term, we will have a series of short talks with the common theme of “M.Y.P. beyond the subject boundaries”:

1. The role of the library in M.Y.P. (Jenny Almhojd)
2. Language Acquisition. (Louise Lloyd)
3. Individual Needs (Sarah Block)

These three teachers do not teach M.Y.P. subjects full time. One is Early Years Coordinator and the others work throughout the school. Yet their contribution to M.Y.P. far exceeds the proportion of time which they give. Their contribution to integrating M.Y.P. into our whole school community is invaluable and immeasurable.