

A snapshot reflection on a preschool in Florence, Italy

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Abstract

The author visited, observed and interviewed the director of 2-5-year-old classrooms in a school located in the city of Florence, Italy. Scuola dell'infanzia is a Cambridge International school located in the city of Florence, Italy. A Cambridge International School has global standards for their programs. They are created by academic rigor and reflect the latest academic standards. The Cambridge Pathway leads seamlessly from primary through secondary and pre-university years. Schools can shape the curriculum around how they want students to learn (<https://www.cambridgeinternational.org>).

This paper is reflecting on the Early Childhood practices that were observed in the school. The children were divided in the classrooms according to their age. The child: teacher ratio is 11:2. In each classroom, there are two teachers, one teacher who speaks English and the other teacher speaks Italian.

Keyword: Cambridge International School, The Kindness Curriculum ISEF graduates orienteering psychomotricity

Introduction

The director of the preschool gave a comprehensive tour of the preschool classrooms and outdoor play area for the students. She explained the program, shared the materials and equipment used with the students and gave an in-depth description of the daily routine. The author posed open-ended statements to the director such as:

- Describe the school
- Discuss the daily schedule
- Review the curriculum
- Comment on the nutrition program
- Clarify extracurricular activities
- Describe parent involvement in the school
- Review diversity in the school

Description of the School

There is one classroom that is specifically for movement activities. This classroom has plenty of hoops, mats and gross motor equipment. The outside area is fenced and has green outdoor carpet. It has a shady area in the yard that is covered with a canopy. Lunch is catered for the children and is organic. Students are from Russia, China, and various places in Europe. Parents visit the school periodically and there are parent meetings monthly.

Curriculum

The school 's philosophy was for the students to learn, discover and share. The school had their Cambridge Assessment International Education curriculum that was thematic approach with suggested themes, lesson and unit plans. In addition, the school implemented The Kindness Curriculum that was developed in the United Kingdom and lastly, the afterschool/training offer plan multidisciplinary curriculum. This paper's focus is on the Kindness Curriculum and the afterschool/training offer plan curriculum.

The Kindness Curriculum from the United Kingdom has been implemented within the classrooms. The curriculum has different units to implement. This curriculum has six (6) years of unit topics and each year has three (3) units. Each unit has learning objectives, concepts, and lesson plans. The lesson plans have learning objectives, materials needed, kindness vocabulary, the appropriate steps to teach the lesson, assessments, tips for diverse learners, and additional resources.

In addition, there are worksheets for each unit that include scenarios for the students to act out, poems, writing and listening activities (randomactsofkindness.org).

Year I

Unit 1-Making Friends and Creating a Kind Classroom

Unit 2-Caring for Others

Unit 3-Feelings & Behaviors

Year 2

Unit 1-Learning to Listening/Good Manners

Unit 2-Learning to Solve Problems

Unit 3-Feelings & Actions

Year 3

Unit 1-How Can I Be Kind?

Unit 2-How Can We Be Kind?

Unit 3-Keep Trying

Year 4

Unit 1-Feelings & Emotions

Unit 2-How I Treat Myself & others

Unit 3-Empathy & Compliments

Year 5

Unit 1-Friendship

Unit 2-Respecting Beliefs

Unit 3-Stress & Geography

Year 6

Unit 1-Healthy Communication

Unit 2-Taking Care of Ourselves

Unit 3-Honesty.What Influences Us

The units have sample activity sheets for teachers to teach specific hands-on lessons that correlate with each unit.

Afterschool Curriculum

The school offers afterschool courses, these course can be taken during school hours or afterschool from September through June. If the parent decides to sign up for the courses during school hours, children are taken from the classroom by the instructor to the school gym. These courses are multidisciplinary and are called POFs (Training Offer Plan) and are therefore carried out during school hours in collaboration with the teachers or they may be offered as Optional Workshops which would take place in the gym afterschool.

All the instructors are ISEF graduates. These instructors have majored in motor sciences, psychomotor engineers or specialists in various disciplines.

Some of the courses/projects are:

- Game Sport-The school has a choice of sports games such as tennis, basketball, handball, minivolley, artistic gymnastics, athletics, orienteering, and archery.
- Play and Learn-Performing physical activity in the gym entirely in English.
- Theater and Movement A-Theatrical animation workshop whose purpose is to discover and use different communicative languages.
- Psychomotricity-Motor activity aimed at promoting a harmonious psychophysical development through the integration and balance of the motor, cognitive and affective dimensions.
- Road Education-Children learn about road signs in a playful way by combining elements taken from the sports and /or using bicycles.
- Orienteering- A northern European origin, in its scholastic application consists in teaching use of compasses and with the help of this equipment, organizing small “treasure hunts”. This activity is a teaching aid for the teachers because through play, it is able to motivate children to study history, geography, mathematics, science, and other school subjects.
- Sports and Food-This project was created to teach children in a playful and fun way very simple elements of food education.
- Chess Psychomotricity-Using a giant floor chessboard (4 x 4 m in non-slip material) individually and in groups, the game of chess and the teaching of the basics of this game as a growth path that stimulates the various spheres, affective, cognitive, relational and motor.

The school had a very warm inviting environment. The children were happy and the teachers presented engaging developmentally appropriate activities. The curriculum was well-balanced and was focused on the intellectual, cognitive, social and emotional development of the children. The concepts and skills presented in the curriculum demonstrated that the children would be well-prepared for primary school.

My Perspective on Scuola dell'infanzia

The visit to the school was a memorable educational learning experience. The students were very engaged with diverse age-appropriate activities. The environment was colorful and warm with many visuals of children's work being displayed in the hallway and classrooms. The outdoor area was surrounded by a fence and secluded from the street. The canopy in the area made it ideal for lunch outside and outdoor art activities when the weather is permissible. Of course, the green outdoor carpet and gross motor equipment made it appropriate for young children.

The idea of teaching using "The Kindness Curriculum was geared for social and emotional development. Gestwicki (2011) discusses a healthy emotional environment offers the security and teaching necessary to nurture emotional control. Also, Bowman & Moore (2006) explained that strong social-emotional development relates to later social and academic success.

The dual language program with English and Italian being taught daily was a full immersion program. As Espinosa (2010) explained that research supports the notion that children can competently acquire two or more languages. In addition, the afterschool program was exciting too, particularly orienteering, handball, and chess psychomotricity.

Conclusion

The director of the preschool did not mention the term dual language learners, However, Garcia (2005) defines dual language learners as students who learn and progress in two languages at early ages. The school's curriculum is taught in English and Italian, with two teachers, one who is fluent in Italian and the other in English. The idea of dual language learners (DLL) is an asset in the early childhood classroom.

Although the premise is the preschool education in Florence, Italy, it is interesting to note that according to Howes, Downer, & Pianta (2011) the DLLs have been the fastest growing student population in the US over the past few decades, due to the increase rates of immigration. As of 2005, one in five children ages 5-17 in the United States had a foreign-born parent (Capps et al, 2005) and many of these children learn English as a second language, though not all.

It was indicated in the Florence schools that teaching in Italy and English was a part of the daily curriculum and that children would be fluent in both Italian and English at an early age.

This educational learning experience was rewarding. It was so interesting to observe Early Childhood Education from a different perspective in another country. This kind of experience really broadens your horizons and extends your education in a diverse positive way. Since traveling can be very expensive, it would be great to exchange ideas regarding early childhood education programs in many different countries and classrooms, virtually. This would only expand our knowledge and give us an opportunity to experience diversity. This experience was global education at its best!

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Author Background

Dr. Delia Robinson Richards is an Associate Professor in Early Childhood Education at the University of the District of Columbia in Washington, DC. She has presented at many education conferences in the United States, Caribbean and Central America. As a Fulbright Scholar, she developed and implemented an early childhood program at the University of the West Indies for inservice teachers. She is currently developing a manuscript related to building equity in the classroom.

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