

Educator Abroad: Teaching (*Insegnare*) and Learning (*Imparare*) with Italian Children

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Over my 30-year career as a certified teacher, researcher, and university teacher educator, I've planned, facilitated and refined educational experiences for children from pre-kindergarten through adolescence, as well as for adults who teach (or were preparing to teach) in New York, Connecticut, Texas, and Arizona.

During the summer of 2008, I served in Italy as a member of Volunteers for Peace, an international non-profit global immersion program directed towards arts, education, and cultural exchange, I was assigned to Barra, an economically disadvantaged area southeast of Naples. Despite my advanced degree, I was considered an adult “counselor” during the summer. I was issued a pair of navy shorts and two red uniform t-shirts. The camp-like program was housed in a sports and aquatic center and was intended to offer children ages 3-13 a safe place to engage in movement and learning experiences from 8:00AM–4:00PM, Monday–Friday.

With my professional background, I assumed that I would be mentoring older students, but found that my assignment was to support a lead teacher in her work with 24 young children. After a few days, I resigned myself to the “learner’s seat,” a position to which I was not accustomed. From this vantage, I realized how advanced the thinking of the four and five years olds under my care appeared to be. The pre-schoolers seemed to believe that they were charged with re-educating me, a middle-aged career teacher, professor of education, and mother of two grown children. As the weeks progressed, I began to perceive ways that these children were using their innate thinking skills to achieve, create, communicate, negotiate, and formulate decisions. I wrote up eight realizations, hoping that these observations, vignettes, and tips (or suggestions) might be of use to other educators.

1. Kids Think Like Economists

Whether in a lunchroom or classroom, children as young as three and four can be rather like expert economists. They

are interested in the movement of goods. They assign value to things, create markets, and negotiate sales. Kids know how to get what they want (not just what they need).

I watched stealthily as kids in Materna (the *bambini* group, who were ages three to five), barter items of food. Children examined their own home-brought lunch or snack, and then perused the goods of their peers. There was no trading if a child placed a high value in what he or she already owned as compared with some other child’s food. But if a trade was to be made, it took only a matter of minutes for transactions to occur and goods to be consumed. No adult interference was sought or needed in these “kid deals.” In fact, when adult observation became obvious, the arrangements become covert, going “under the table” so to speak. These trades often involved a hunk of mozzarella, *pollo* (chicken) in a metal container, spaghetti *paninis*, homemade meatballs, or a mass of cream cheese (known in Italy by its American exported brand name, “Philadelphia”).

Tip: Provide time in the classroom setting for students to examine, handle, assign value to, and trade “stuff” (such as shells, coins, baseball cards, plastic figurines, sports caps, minerals and other ‘artifacts’ that teachers might keep in an artifact tub or “treasure chest”). Post an activity chart: “KEEP or TRADE?” Students can then develop their decision-making and negotiation skill sets by working in groups to assign value to various items and list them on the chart as items to keep, or goods to trade away. Then the groups can negotiate and trade with each other.

2. Kids Think Like Lawyers

I never met a young child who didn’t have a clear opinion on an issue that affected him or her. I learned from my *bambini* group that kids think like lawyers: they argue, consider, rebut, make their points, change their mind, defend their positions, restate their demands. If confronted with a decision they don’t like they might cry, pout, capitulate, resist, or latch on to a new

interest. They are active users of body language to make their positions known. In Barra, most children wore their emotions on their sleeve, only hiding their true thoughts if they wished to gain an advantage from doing so.

If a child did not like a conclusion to a problem, he or she might revisit the issue later when most adults (and other kids) assumed that the issue was done or forgotten. I learned that kid-thinking includes persistence, determination, and tenacity. Children become adept at weighing the evidence: “Does this action truly benefit me? Is it better to detach and move on to the next activity?” I discovered that “kid-thinking” involves weighing the evidence, drawing conclusions and rendering verdicts on what seems fair.

Tip: Rather than solving classroom or playground disputes for your students, offer them opportunities to work through problems themselves, with minimal guidance. Encourage students to ask, “Is this true? Why or Why not?” Create a chart of perceptions about a situation, with column headings “FAIR/UNFAIR,” and then let students describe their own actions and events to you and to each other. Even in a heated argument, I could tell that not enough “wait time” was offered by adults for the children to resolve misunderstandings on their own. I heard complaints if adults stepped in too soon with respect to a situation that kids were working out, especially if they themselves had established game rules and guidelines for their own activities at recess. Sometimes the quiet presence of an adult is all that’s required for a successful resolution.

3. Kids Think Like Strategists

The youngsters in Materna demonstrated clever and strategic thinking. They were savvy, goal oriented and rarely random in their approaches to any task. Whether engaged in constructing sand forts or dance routines, their thinking was more advanced and assertive than what most schools, teachers, parents and educational systems across the globe give them credit for. Young children quickly determine which adult is in charge and assess who makes decisions that affect them. They don’t waste their time approaching individuals lower on the decision-making chain of command, especially if they want their needs met promptly. They gauge the situation, identify the person to approach, and consider whether they will benefit from negotiation or accepting a directive from the authority at that time. For example, the children were quick to note the tone and volume of an adult’s voice, and most were quick to read the social cues and identify the appropriate person to approach. (They were not likely to approach me until I’d proved myself capable of solving certain types of problems.)

After a week or so, when the head teacher and I developed a mutual trust, we worked as a team to support each other and the children. Occasionally, we laughed out loud (which is its own universal language). (Teaching in teams, with collaborative note-taking and observation of students, is an approach developed by the Reggio Emilia pre-school and early childhood programs.)¹ Children quickly noticed the collegial mood, and

when the head teacher introduced me again during a singing circle, my full participation further strengthened my connection with the students.

Tip: Share leadership in your classroom from Day One. Introduce visitors, parent volunteers, student teachers, and adult paraprofessionals to your students and demonstrate co-teaching roles along with a genuine respect for your students. Limit any type of competition between adults in the room. Let the children know that they are “fortunate to have _____ (name of adult) teach something new today,” and then move on. Children will sense quickly both oversized adult ego and pecking order in a classroom setting. It is their natural inclination to be vigilant and observe the scene in their everyday environment. Operating from an understanding of child development, you can inform any adult who interacts with your students about the emotional environment of safety, care, and respect that you have cultivated as a teacher. As the preeminent role model in the classroom, you need to communicate clearly to adults and students alike your shared leadership expectations.

4. Kids Think Like Kids

Kids are not impressed with titles. It made no difference to them if I held a Ph. D., was visiting from the United States, or, for that matter, was related to royalty. Their only concern was whether I (or anyone else) understood and communicated effectively in their native language (Italian), answered their questions, and got things done. If not, my value was relegated to functional support only. My utilitarian tasks included opening water bottles, inserting straws into juice boxes, securing rubber bathing caps upon flowing heads of thick hair, cleaning up paint spills, and bandaging bruised knees.

Tip: Establish an inclusive environment whereby children develop appreciation and gratitude lists for people, situations, and helpers. Teach children to embrace the array of individuals in their school that support them and encourage compliments. Teach, too, the delineation of duties and assign classroom tasks to teams of two, so that children can learn to assist each other (as the lead teacher and I assisted each other). This builds cooperation and confidence.

5. Kids Think Like Keepers of the Culture

I know that researchers report how open-minded young children are. However, I didn’t see it when it came to sports. First, I observed that gender roles were already clearly defined at this young age. Most girls (and only a few boys) did not want to participate in a team game. Second, the children expressed little interest in learning about what might be a fun, new activity. They were not motivated into moving beyond their culturally socialized passion for the Italian national sport of *calcio* (soccer). I was hoping they might be just a little bit curious about America’s traditional pastime.

I had packed an entire youth-sized set of bases, plastic balls, bats, and kid-sized mitts in my gear and hauled it across the Atlantic, but my young campers showed me that *calcio*, not

baseball, was “embedded in their genes.” When I pitched a regulation size plastic baseball to the first child at bat, he waited for it to fall to the ground, dropped his bat, and then the entire line-up left the designated “dugout” and proceeded to kick the ball across the field, with no regard to carefully placed bases (my simulated infield). These kids would not indulge me for a single inning. I was the outsider, and they resorted to thinking like Italian children—which they were. I knew when I was defeated, and quietly “threw in the towel.”

Tip: Embrace regional and localized ways of thinking, and present visual images of children in global contexts. Ask students what they observe about other children’s dress, play,



toys, food, celebrations, physical attributes, and daily routines. Encourage students to compare and contrast what they see with aspects of their own lives, and to look for similarities in the needs of children wherever they are growing up. Using a kid-friendly definition of “culture” helps them organize their thoughts: “Culture is the way of life of a group of people.”

6. Kids Think Like Pragmatists

I learned that kids’ thinking is pragmatic, temporal, and utilitarian. Kids usually focus on what is happening in-the-moment: food, sleep, play, family and playthings, rather than what happened in the past or what will happen in the future. They’ll cry with real tears and sobs if it will help them obtain clay, crayons, toys, a soccer ball, their turn, the position at the front or back of the line, or a host of other situational opportunities. Young children also use body movements and premeditation. They can run like lightning when it suits them, or move at a snail’s

pace when adults are in a hurry. They pace themselves depending upon their mindset and motivation. They ponder, “Do I want to delay the inevitable?” (There’s apparently no need to hurry as we change out of muddy soccer clothes.) “Do I want to rush to the next desirable event?” (I’ll finish this worksheet in a flash if snack time is next!)

When kids eat, they eat and talk; when they play, they play with their friends and with their stuff. In other words, they are living “in-the-moment” rather than thinking of their parents or the adults nearby, or worrying over government policies, world energy supplies, or tomorrow’s weather.

Tip: Kids don’t wait for things to work, people to arrive, or the music to start—they play with their surroundings and environment. They discover, make things work for them, trace in dirt, run after birds, examine animal waste, or blow bubbles with their saliva.

Kids are not good at anticipating the need for future supplies and materials, delays that might arise, or even technological limits or shortcomings. While intrigued by technology, young children exhibit little patience for defunct electrical systems or programs that don’t work when the switch is turned on; they will move to a more enjoyable activity, such as constructing balloon hats or necklaces, rather than waiting for downloads that take too long.

Insure that access to technology is available for each student or team of two so that students are fully engaged with instruments, pads, iPhones, or computers. Avoid asking students to cluster around a computer screen, or to deal with faulty equipment. Preview websites for child-friendly content that can include chants, songs, and multi-modal literacy forms to promote active learning. If using iPhones, list key questions for students as they conduct interviews with each other (an excellent activity for ELL language development), and allow sufficient time for students to listen to the playback of their own voice recordings during the same day and block of time.

7. Kids Think Like Artists

Young children are proud of their work, and those who are loved and nurtured think highly of themselves and value their own creations. Their natural inclination is to share their art with their families and take it home the day they create it. Although educators are inclined to keep students’ work to decorate the room, children often don’t want that.

I learned that whether children create a mural, a map, an illustration related to a story or event, or a clay model, they feel a sense of ownership of the work. They don’t want to turn it over to you for archives or portfolio collections. Teachers often feel obliged to showcase the writing, art, and designs of our students, but my children set me straight. If they created artistic expressions, there was no way that I was going to keep them, even for 24 hours to make copies! They argued passionately with me, using words and hand motions. This was their art, and the works they produced were their proud possessions. We eventually found a way to compromise.

Tip: Children frequently offer their personal creations as “gifts” to teachers, parents, coaches, physicians, and caseworkers. I was taught by the children in Materna to accept graciously their gifts and also to consider how I might help them share their work, but still maintain ownership of it. We established an art gallery in the school’s foyer, where weekly displays enticed other students, parents, and youth counselors to review and acknowledge their work. The lobby became a magnet for art appreciation. Students loved it. When teachers shifted ownership of public space to the child artists, those students were able to “loosen their grip” on their creations, at least for a few days.

8. Kids Think like Global Citizens

As a native speaker of English, I realized how English-language centered policies that frame education in the United States are limiting to children, especially as we embark upon our role in the 21st century global economy. The curriculum for the summer program in Italy mandated English language instruction for a set time period every day for the children, all native Italian speakers. The instruction included songs and movement activities in English, taught by a native English-speaking teacher who was raised in the United Kingdom. Not only were the young children under my care being readied for communicating in a global world, but each of the young university volunteers from countries abroad (Korea, Hungary, Mexico, France, Germany, and Spain) who were working at the camp all spoke fluent English in addition to their native language. Despite my education credentials, I felt tremendously inadequate. This experience helped me realize that, beginning in the primary grades, language development should be a priority component of social studies education in the United States.

Children in Materna decided to take my language instruction into their own hands. I was required to take Italian language lessons from two insistent five-year olds. Maria Elena and Giovanna used four-inch plastic figurines to teach me both the colors and names of farm and jungle animals. “*Barbara, Qual è il nome di questo animale?*” (What is the name of this animal?) Can you imagine not knowing the answer?! I was in the learner’s seat, and it didn’t feel that comfortable. Luckily, my teachers seemed to know about rewarding their student. The next day, when I managed to answer correctly, *Eun elefante*, they smiled at me and replied gleefully in unison, “*Brava, Barbara!*”

Tip: Develop a basic vocabulary in the native language spoken by the children in your life. Walk around school property and learn the names of objects in the environment. Teachers can find dual language posters for weather, travel routes, directions, seasons, and celebrations. It’s an opportunity for two-way learning.

Translating the Experience

When I wasn’t acting as the adult in charge but, rather, more as an observer, the three-to-five year olds taught me a lot about “kid-thinking.” The children and I learned in conjunction with

each other; we had fun; we laughed; I made mistakes, and they corrected me. I was flexible; I made adjustments, worried less, and became aware of the organic nature of a teacher’s work. I learned that kids are capable of thinking on very advanced levels when adults grant them the time to focus on one activity at a time, limit distractions, facilitate more, regiment less, and provide a safe, calm environment.

Certainly, my eight points above are generalizations, and may not apply to an individual student on a particular day. Not every child enjoys the “national sport,” or is quick to tell you what it is he or she really needs. But like a weather report, these eight points helped me pay better attention to what was happening in my new learning environment. I was learning new things about children, and learning about what it’s like to be a beginner, to be a learner set down in a new culture.

Interestingly, much of what I discovered from my international experience reflects what John Dewey termed, “an educational scheme, the occurrence of a desire and impulse that is an occasion and a demand for the formation of a plan and method of activity”² that address the purposes that activate students’ interest. Dewey advanced the notion that teachers act as facilitators in planning and preparing the environment in which children’s learning can be fluid, organic, integrated, and experiential.³

I learned about “kid-thinking” from my international experience. In retrospect, these lessons can be learned from students in our own classrooms. Meaningful interactions occur not just during formal lessons, but also during special events, lunch, and recess. We can gain new perspectives on how children think by observing how they already make meaning of their world and how they assume roles as decision makers, negotiators, assessors, communicators, artists, pragmatists, keepers of culture, and global citizens. Armed with this observational data, we can create classroom environments that nurture and extend children’s thinking . . . and our own, as well. 🌍

Notes

1. “Values of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Childhood Education,” The Innovative Teacher Project (A Collaboration with School of Education of Mills College in Oakland, California), www.innovative-teacherproject.org/reggio/values.php.
2. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1938), 78.
3. Dewey, 72–73.

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