

Saturday Morning (Intercultural) School

Guest post by Maria Flora Mangano

Since the end of 2021, I have been involved in an after-school activity for 4 to 12-year-olds. This volunteer work supports pupils doing their homework once a week, on Saturday mornings. This activity was created by a teacher at the beginning of the current school term, in October 2021, and it takes place in a parish of the city center of my town, Viterbo, near Rome. The initial aim was to reach non-Italian children from the city center, which is mostly inhabited by non-native families. In a short time, additional children arrived from different zones of the town and the surroundings.

Mostly the families are migrants who have reached Italy during the last few years. They come from Asia (mainly India and Sri Lanka), Africa (especially Nigeria), and Europe (particularly Romania and Ukraine). The religious backgrounds of students are uncommonly mixed: the family from India is Sikh, while the ones from Sri Lanka are Buddhists; and some other families are Christians: the ones from Nigeria belong to the Evangelical Church, while the ones from Eastern Europe are Orthodox (the family from Romania), and Catholic (the ones from Ukraine).

Almost all of these children were born in Italy, mostly in Viterbo, and they sometimes go to the same school. Most of these second-generation children feel comfortable in combining their families' native culture (tradition, religion, language, as well as food), with the Italian culture. The children mainly consider themselves Italian and citizens of Viterbo; they are bilingual, using their parents' language at home. Many children, especially the ones from India and Sri Lanka, experience a serene balance between the two cultural contexts, probably because of the easy, integrated atmosphere in their homes. Some of the little girls from Sri Lanka, for instance, cook local recipes with meat and pork, despite the vegetarian tradition of their parents, and several children have made a Christmas tree, although their families did not celebrate Christmas in their native countries.

What the children experience at home, with relatives and friends of their parents' culture, often coexists, interacts, and enriches - we may say "is in dialogue" - with what they experience at school, as well as in this after-school activity. At the same time, their daily sharing with Italian and non-Italian people (peers, teachers, or neighbors, for instance) feeds their knowledge, and it frequently provides precious input to their families. Some, in fact, help their parents in improving their understanding of the Italian language, in talking, reading, or writing; others assist Italian people (even us) to better understand their parents' and family's needs.

This "cultural balance" between the families' native culture and the Italian one also enriches the Saturday morning lessons. The class is made up of almost 20 children, including a small number

of Italian pupils. The adult volunteers number fewer than 10, and we are all Italian, with the exception of one English-native teacher. Almost half of us are teachers, drawn from different fields and at various school levels; we differ in experience in volunteering, and in working with children.

The basic idea is to privilege the one-to-one relationship, thus, one volunteer works with one child, or with a few. This allows us to work in depth with the ones who need more time and attention, making up almost half of the class. Furthermore, this method helped us especially over the winter, given the increasing peak of infection in Italy, and it allowed us to grant this service every week without any resulting cases of Covid-19.

Moreover, working with one or two children provides time for starting to fill further gaps, often emotional, rather than cognitive or related to homework, as many children feel understood, and supported in this context. This is most relevant for those with problems at home, sometimes with divorced or single parents, and for those with large families and several brothers and sisters, who usually did not have enough space and time to express themselves at home.

The activity consists in a 3-hour lesson, from 9 to 12, with a break in the middle. We generally start by reading aloud a lyric of an Italian song, which may help the children in reading practice, and also constructs an environment for working together as a class.

During these few months of activity, I observed an increasing involvement by many pupils in terms of participation: they are joyful, respectful, and grateful, and mostly happy to come to “Saturday morning school”, as we call it. Furthermore, several children get involved in helping each other, without competition, pride, or jealousy. In many of them, I observed a genuine attitude of collaboration, respecting the other being the first, unspoken, and basic rule of the class.

I would say that most of these children consider the class to be a “safe space,” where everybody feels at the same level as others, without obstacles, conflicts, or borders (Opffer, 2015). It is a class having diversity at various levels, but this diversity provides richness and an opportunity for growing. Some children, for instance, arrived at Saturday school with relationship issues in their daily classes; some others were considered silent or shy by their teachers or parents; still others were said to be careless or lazy, or hyperkinetic and distracted.

I observed that the reciprocal help among children, often of the same age, could progressively soften these characteristics. At the same time, the opportunity to work alone with an adult, quite rare in their regular classes, frequently eased the pressure of emotional and cognitive tensions. The result, week after week, is a slow spread of lightness and joy, which characterizes the group in every lesson.

This feeling has often reached the families: some parents mentioned the progress they could observe in their kids, others expressed their gratitude by preparing snacks for our break. Initially we asked to the families to provide snacks for their own children: in a few weeks, some started to bring a cake or pizza for the entire class, as well as drinks and glasses.



Thanks to a volunteer who used to be an art teacher, many children learned and improved in drawing, painting, and in works with paper. At Christmas time, for instance, they prepared presents for their families using recycled materials, and we decorated the Christmas tree together, by keeping it in class, as shown in the picture.

Soon after, we started to create Carnival masks. We organized a Carnival party for the last Saturday of February, with a lunch including parents. The party was in the afternoon and it was open to children in the parish's catechism class and their families, who are mostly Italian.

We benefitted from the large indoor spaces of the convent which hosts Saturday school, as it was one of the coldest and windiest days of winter, and we could not stay outdoors. We asked all the participants to respect the safety measures, with facial masks even for the youngest (4-5 years old). We use these same measures in class.

We made Carnival masks using recycled materials, which did not cover their faces, and left them free to move. There were about 50 children, with another 30 adults or youths. We proposed that parents wear a Carnival mask as well, which the teacher made for them just before the party. A mother from Ukraine told us that day that she came from the Donbass region, where only two days before the war had started. She belongs to the Russian-speaking community of the Donbass, and she felt upset, and did not want to join the party. Nevertheless, her 7-year-old daughter was born in Italy, does not know Russian, and has little understanding of the dramatic situation of her mother's country. She came to the morning lesson wearing a Carnival mask, as she was eagerly looking forward to that day. This mother did not join lunch, but she came back in the afternoon with her daughter to join the party, she remained and played with us, and accepted my proposal to wear a funny hat. She was touched by the time we shared and felt a bit relieved.

Another Ukrainian mother brought her 9-year-old son, who was born in Italy and does not know Ukrainian, and he also wore the Carnival mask with the same excitement as his young friend. This mother stayed neither for lunch nor the party and was too scared to talk or share her pain with us.

The Sikh family and the ones from Sri Lanka participated in the lunch, preparing food from their native traditions for all of us; the volunteers prepared some typical Italian food as well. These families helped us set the table and clear it, as well as helping to clean the large hall we used for the party, after the event.



One mother from Sri Lanka returned home just before the beginning of the party to get her Carnival mask, showing an 8th century woman. She joined the little parade of masks with her daughter, who had made her own mask, a bright sun, with the teacher's help. The two masks shown in the photo here were made by this 10-year-old.

For some children and their families, it was their first Carnival mask and first Carnival party. For most participants, it was the first party after the pandemic, or after a long time. For many of us it was an experience of bridges: across, among (and maybe beyond) ages, cultures, jobs, choices, and life experiences. We will probably only realize the full implications of this event later on, as well as what emerges every Saturday morning at the school.

This teaching experience is like opening a surprise, which changes every week, at several levels: it implies that we observe, promote, and share relationships with the children and their parents, and the connections among them. Furthermore, it implies living and sharing what happens among us, as adults, volunteers, and teachers.

For all of us, Saturday morning school adds to daily work or study, and to ordinary life, but my feeling is that this activity is something more than just an after-school volunteer activity. It “adds value,” that is, it complements what is missing, it enhances something lacking, and may complete what we *are* rather than what we *do*.

Another lesson to be gained from this school is the opportunity to experience gratitude from many children, and often from their parents. The term “gratitude” has the same Latin root as *grazie* (“thanks” in Italian), and “grace,” literally, something unexpected, fortuitous, which happens and surprises us. As a gift.

At the beginning of March, we teachers proposed to the class to prepare drawings dedicated to peace. The parish which hosts Saturday morning school is currently preparing materials to send to

Ukraine, especially medicines, food, and clothing. This activity involves several parishes in town, as well as many other Italian towns, as well as other countries in the EU. The Ukrainian community is quite numerous in Italy and in each town it coordinates this aid. This material reaches Ukraine as well as Ukrainian refugees in nearby countries.

We proposed to the children to include their drawings in the boxes as gifts for Ukrainian children and adults. The photo below shows a few examples of their drawings which they prepared at the end of the lesson.



An Italian 7-year-old girl drew a cat and a dog holding hands with a heart in the middle as example of peace, while a 6-year-old boy from Sri Lanka offered a Pokemon card from his collection. He explained his choice in a letter, written with the help of a 12-year-old Italian girl: this card was among his favorites, as it is colorful and shiny. He wished to give the same bright light to the Ukrainian children.

What I have tried to describe so far may be the "visible" part of the experience, as the Little Prince would say. The deepest meaning is probably invisible and unspoken.

One of the most important lessons of these children for me, in fact, is the importance of the *untold*, that is, what cannot be expressed through and with words. The adults, as the Little Prince reminded us, often forget it, therefore the children patiently remind us to keep it in mind.

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