Center for Intercultural Dialogue

In Dialogue

CID Occasional Papers #2

When the Letters Sing and the Numbers Jump: Education as a Space of Relationship

Maria Flora Mangano

November 2024

WWW.CENTERFORINTERCULTURALDIALOGUE.ORG

Author

Maria Flora Mangano is an Italian scholar of intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue, with a background in both natural sciences (Ph.D. in Biochemistry) and social sciences (Ph.D. in Humanistic Intercultural Studies). Since 2007, she has been teaching *Dialogue between Cultures* and *Communication of Scientific Research* to early career scientists drawn from different fields of study within the natural, social, and human sciences, mostly in Italian universities.

She has been involved with the Center for Intercultural Dialogue since its beginnings, as a participant in the National Communication Association Summer Conference on Intercultural Dialogue in Istanbul, Turkey in 2009, and has contributed to the Center often over the past 14 years. In addition to academic teaching, since 2002 she has worked with second-generation children and teenagers coming from different cultures and from families in need. This is a no cost one-on-one weekly program, which she conducts on her own, in her home, supplemented by additional outdoor activities.

Mangano's field of study is dialogue as a space of relationship *among*, *across,* and *beyond* cultures and disciplines. Her approach to research and teaching is transcultural and transdisciplinary; in this perspective, the space of relationship is mediated by the philosophy of dialogue, taking inspiration from Martin Buber's philosophy of education. Among her books is *Relationship as a Space "In Between": A Transcultural and Transdisciplinary Approach Mediated by Dialogue in Academic Teaching*; two other volumes are in Italian: *Si Può Immaginare Sisifo Felice.* [One May Imagine Sisyphus Happy], and *Le Parole dei Giovani Sisifo.* [The Words of the Young Sisyphus].

When the Letters Sing and the Numbers Jump: Education as a Space of Relationship

Maria Flora Mangano

ABSTRACT: This occasional paper aims to deepen the meaning of education as a space of relationship *across, among*, and *beyond* cultures, fields of study, and student ages. A "homemade" and "home based" one-to-one teaching of second-generation children and teenagers in difficulty is described. Volunteer, replicable, and feasible activities complementing formal education were conducted *with* and *for* students and their families. This approach may be a challenge for scholars and educators having little prior experience with children. Nevertheless, it provides potential for (re)thinking education as a combination of learning and teaching, involving indoor and outdoor cultural activities; it becomes an accessible and free space, where students, families, and teachers may meet and grow together.

1. The Educational Relationship

The teaching approach described in these pages takes inspiration from contemporary scholars, educators, and pedagogical theorists who put relationships at the center of their work, with a focus on the bond between student and teacher.

Martin Buber's view on education has inspired my teaching and research on relationship as a space "in between" over almost two decades, and so serves as the initial framework in what follows. In addition to Buber, I emphasize the contributions of three Italian education theorists, whose work, study and thought have been broadly influential far beyond national boundaries as their ideas continue to nurture generations of teachers, students, and families: Maria Montessori (1870-1952), Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967), and Danilo Dolci (1924-1997).

1.1. Martin Buber's Perspective

Martin Buber (1878-1965) founder of the philosophy of dialogue, uses a visual image for expressing his approach to education:

> I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality, I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation. (Buber, 1967, p. 693)

The idea of teaching as an open window on reality, which the student may observe through the teacher, starting from dialogue, serves to summarize the meaning of Buber's educational relationship. It is the space where students and educator may meet, and a relationship may occur.

As Buber does not specify the age of the student, the reader may suppose that this perspective relates to every level of education. Before approaching children and teenagers, I imagined the relationship as being between Buber and his students at university level, my audience as well for many years. However, when I approached a different audience, with diverse needs, I discovered the universality of Buber's vision. As a result, his ideas still enrich my approach to teaching, regardless of student age.

Buber's educational relationship is not based on reciprocity between the teacher and the student, who are at different levels and thus are not supposed to be, or to become, friends. The space of relationship in education, in his opinion, is centered on "inclusion" (Buber, 1993, pp. 176-177). This is something different from empathy, involving understanding a student's needs, including emotion, personal history, and culture. To better grasp the meaning of the term "inclusion," we may refer to the original expression used by Buber, who wrote his essay on education in German. He chose the word *Umfassung*, derived from the verb *umfassen*, which has several meanings: "to embrace," "to include," "to comprehend," and "to contain." His intent is to consider all these meanings in a polysemic term, implying that the educator should "embrace" the student, accepting all of their being. At the same time, the teacher should "include" the student in the educational process, thus taking them out of themselves (from the Latin etymology of "to educate," *ex ducere*). Moreover, the educator should "comprehend" the students, thus understand them, following the Latin verb *cum prendere*, which literally means "to take in the mind." It also conveys "to take together," "to unite," and is closely related to the verb "to include." Finally, the teacher should "contain" the students, thus, controlling and limiting their actions. In this sense, Buber's "inclusion" is taken to be a specific capacity on the part of the educator; it cannot be mutual, as the student is not able to practice it towards the teacher (Buber, 1993, p. 180).

The educator should be involved in the relationship with students, and control it; to embrace them, by listening with deliberate effort; and to limit their role to respecting and promoting the student's singularity. The

strength of the term "inclusion" when considering these four verbs increases when teaching is addressed to the youngest students, above all to children and teens.

The verbs turn into actions, reminding educators of their concrete duties. They are asked to really embrace students, and to involve them in the first steps of learning. Furthermore, educators are requested to comprehend, to understand, to carefully observe and listen to students, by trying to interpret their verbal, and above all their nonverbal, messages. Then, teachers are asked to limit and to contain these, sometimes even by explaining the rules for the first time, especially for children coming from a complicated context, where the rules may not be so frequent or obvious.

1.2 On the Side of the Unseen, Especially Children

The three Italian pedagogical theorists of the past century to be discussed here mainly focused on the youngest children, especially those in need.

Maria Montessori's insight, leading her to develop a new approach to teaching, primarily developed as a response to difficulties in learning by children with mental illnesses; then her method was broadly adapted, reaching almost every continent. Based on self-directed activity as well as hands-on learning and play, the Montessori method puts children at the center, with tools and teaching materials they choose, use, and handle. Educators, as well as family members, are involved in this education perspective, which has three components – student, teacher, and family – all having the same level of importance (Montessori, 2017).

Lorenzo Milani was a Catholic priest and an educator; his crucial contribution to education originated in Barbiana, a poor and isolated village close to Florence, where he was transferred, and lived until his death. What at the beginning appeared as a sort of "exile" in a context of exclusion and marginalization – the inhabitants were mainly illiterate farmers – became the incubator for a decisive teaching experience known today as the "Barbiana school." Open the whole day and the whole year, this school aimed to create a community of students who could live and study together, by learning through sharing, starting from their experiences of daily life.

The core of the Barbiana school may be conveyed through the message "I care," which Father Milani wrote in English and used in class. It was intended as a response to a slogan used by the fascist Italian Government of that time, which claimed the opposite: "I do not care." Milani's contribution to educating "the youth of Barbiana," as he called them, continues, as he described his approach to education in several works, essays, and letters, since translated into multiple languages (Milani, 2017).

Danilo Dolci was a sociologist, and a non-violence activist in addition to being a pedagogical scholar and educator. His long and intense life was mainly devoted, as was the case for Milani, to the inhabitants of a poor and marginalized village (Cipolla, 2012). He left Northern Italy, where he lived and worked, moving south to Sicily, specifically to Trappeto, a small town close to Palermo. In this context of mainly illiterate fishermen in impoverished conditions, he developed the "Village of God." He wished to offer a second chance to the inhabitants, based on education for both youths and adults. The method he developed was founded on what he called the "reciprocal maieutic." The term took inspiration from what is more commonly termed the "Socratic method." *Maieutic* literally means "the art of obstetrics," thus referencing the ability to give life to another. Dolci's approach was centered on theoretical and practical activities, especially addressed to what he called the "poor souls" of Trappeto. His idea developed from the conviction that everyone can learn from daily life, finding the tools for understanding inside ourselves. The teacher may help in this process, just as the midwife did for Socrates.

These three education theorists founded methods and schools which still underlie the approach to education taken by numerous teachers and scholars, as well as associations or research centers focused on education, around the world.

I have been fascinated by their lives and perspectives and intrigued by their special attention to people in difficult situations. I have taken inspiration from each of them, trying to develop a method which might be applied at home, in a sort of "handmade space," thus, something different from had been created previously.

I emphasize a close relationship with students and their families, rather than focusing on school or associations, over time developing a technique that might be adapted to different contexts by other educators. The Montessori method's emphasis on self-directed and hands-on learning particularly captured me, suggesting a beginning point, especially for children in difficulty.

The volunteer experiences I have had with people in need, over almost thirty years, as well as teaching doctoral students, have guided me in defining my approach with children and teens. Moreover, the study of relationship in education helped me in this experience, which I try to improve through dialogue with students and their families.

2. A "Homemade" and "Home Based" School

The teaching I have been doing since 2022 is mainly "homemade," since I have designed it; it is also "home based," as it mostly occurs in my home, for a limited number of students, ranging from 4 to 18 years old. It is different

from a tutor volunteering to help students with homework, something which I did for several years.[1] Those charitable activities were mainly promoted by associations, were often hosted in parishes, and were carried out jointly with other volunteers and educators.

Explaining the schooling practices discussed here is difficult in English, and it was not easy even in Italian.[2] Furthermore, choosing a term risks prematurely defining, literally *de-limiting*, this education approach, which instead needs to remain open, and tailored to the other's needs, especially those of the youngest in difficult situations.

The basic idea is to accompany the growth of children and teens having various difficulties, in order to add tools supplementing those already provided by their school and by their family. That is why Buber's image of education as an open window on reality seems to me the most appropriate way to describe this attempt, which points to taking the student by the hand (and family members as well).

It is an educational effort on multiple levels: it is based on a one-to-one relationship, rather than one teacher to an entire class; once a week, rather than every day; in a safe space – often my home, rather than a school or an association – where each student can feel comfortable, listened to, and cared for.

The program is centered on constructing a solid base by improving fundamental content. For younger children, this typically means a focus on reading, writing, and counting; for teens, the frequent focus is on mathematics and literature – both in Italian and English. We also dedicate time and effort to art, particularly with the youngest, including drawing, painting, collage, and music – especially singing and dancing. Furthermore, with some students we complement our study with monthly cultural activities: either outdoors (visits to botanical or zoological gardens, trips to the forest or parks, as well as villages and towns, mostly in Central Italy), or indoors (visits to a public library, museum, concert, circus, or theatre).

I share what happens with the students' families, through weekly detailed conversations, either in person or by phone. Quite often the result is an education relationship which expands to involve family members, especially mothers. Essentially, this is a sort of "cultural foster care," using the two meanings of the term "culture" derived from the Latin verb *colere*: the activities which allow "cultivating" – in the sense of nurturing – "the human soul through education"; and the "collective customs and achievements of a people" (Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, & Lindsley, 2006, p.5).

In Italy, there are examples of an approach to school "outside the borders," (Bordin, *et al.*, 2021). These are pilot projects, mostly developed during the pandemic, and especially relevant to small, rural villages in Italy, at risk of being abandoned by inhabitants. They include programs for students at different ages, outdoor activities in nature, and activities

outside of school, such as visiting a museum or library, or attending a concert.

These experiences of "extended school" mainly involve associations, schools, and educational research centers. The voluntary and autonomous initiative of educators to work with students in need is not frequently described at present, at least from what I have found. The peril is to exclude those students having the greatest support needs, and who are at risk of being neglected twice: first, by the institutions and local services, from which their families typically seem quite distant; and second, from the voluntary associations providing tutoring help, which is often ignored by these families.

2.1 The Context

This teaching approach is mainly addressed to second-generation students, who were born in Italy, most often to Moroccan and Nigerian families. Therefore, the education relationship often allows for an intercultural and interreligious dialogue, in addition to the intergenerational one, with both students and their parents and relatives.

Mostly these children belong to low-income, one-parent families, some with a network of relatives in their same town, others almost alone; with occasional, sometimes regular, jobs; and who often are receiving benefits from local institutions and charities.

These children and teens are loved and cared for, mainly joyful and relaxed, despite the complexity of what they experience at home. For all of them, the female presence is crucial (mothers, grandmothers, or aunties), while fathers and, more broadly, men of the family, are mostly absent: they have prematurely passed away, or have legal troubles, or are at work the whole day. Furthermore, in almost every family, there is at least one member having physical and/or mental illnesses, thus, most of these students have already faced illness and disability and, in some cases, death. The result is often an increased awareness of illness, disability, and death, especially when compared to their peers drawn from native-born Italian families. Despite this, their awareness usually seems not to influence their typically positive and serene vision of life. Only in one case did the burden appear excessive, and that one (an 11-year-old girl) was receiving support from her school psychologist as well as local health care specialists.

As almost all their families are non-Italian, these students are bilingual. They learn early to translate for the adults of their family, who hardly know Italian and mainly use their native language. The education level of these adults is usually low, thus, the kids soon learn to serve as the bridge at school, at home, and in daily life. They discover how to inhabit a liminal space, "in-between," something typical of second-generation youth. This is evident both with those in primary and secondary school, even with the youngest children,

as most of their peers are Italian.

Their families are mostly unaware of the cultural and social burden faced by their children, as the adults primarily focus on concrete daily needs, which are frequently multiple and demanding. In a way, the adults also inhabit a liminal space, which nevertheless is different from that of their children: they are mostly migrants who were forced to leave their home countries to find jobs. The economic concern overcomes and often distracts these adults from the social and cultural load of their children, as they cope with facing daily urgencies. The result is frequently a gap between their needs, as adults, parents, and relatives, and the needs of their children, who live, and approach the world, as Italians. Therefore, the children's daily reality is constantly mixed, sometimes also confused and confusing. They probably experience a different type of longing from older family members, missing and wanting neither the language nor the traditions and memories of their home country; instead, they need to know who they really are, where is their place in the world, and to whom they belong, thus, which country, faith, tradition, and land is theirs. In one word: what is, or may be, their identity.

3. When the Other Knocks at the Door…

I have almost twenty years' experience with the liminal space in education, in terms of cultural and social burdens, mainly related to teaching young researchers drawn from diverse continents and fields of study. I have investigated the meaning of relationship as an "in between" space mediated by dialogue *among, across*, and *beyond* cultures and disciplines in academic teaching (Mangano, 2018).

Over the last few years, I expected to continue to teach and to deepen this approach to relationship and dialogue, which is my research focus. Nevertheless, unexpectedly, these young students found me before I even realized that I was looking for them. One after another, they knocked at my door, in a fortuitous way, only apparently by chance.

Since 2022, their families have asked me for help. At the beginning, I started with one boy (at that time 11 years old), once a week, to help improve his English; but then, some others came, of different ages, and having diverse needs. Some have now concluded their journeys, and others have come in their place. The youngest ones, for instance, of nearly four and almost five years old, arrived in July 2024.

Essentially, I closed the "institutional door," that is, voluntary teaching within associations, instead opening the door of my home. This schooling now occupies my whole week, having become my full-time activity. I stop when I travel – mainly to teach communication of scientific research to doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows, at the invitation of

universities and research centers, mainly in Northern Italy.

Is it possible to propose the approach to teaching as a space of relationship mediated by dialogue to students as young as four? If so, is it feasible to use this approach on our own, as teachers and educators, neither involving schools and associations, nor teachers who are trained to work with children and teens? I started asking these questions when I decided to open the door of my home.

Lesson after lesson, working with students, approaching their worlds, histories, and families, I have collected a number of findings which may indicate a possible answer. Probably more than one: it is an attempt to respond, which may suggest new questions and eventual implications.

When we open the door, particularly the one to our home –often quite close to the one to our heart – the unexpected may happen; the Other is in front of us, and her/his presence, face, and look ask for a question (Lévinas, 1969).

The Other bursts into our (daily) life, and surprises us, by forcing us to make a few choices: answering their call – or not; changing our programs - or not; and deciding to get involved – or not. This is deeper with a young child in difficulty.

The following experiences derive from the wonder that results; what initially was awe slowly became awareness. This consciousness has suggested, oriented, and inspired the teaching approach I describe, with increasing responsibility: first as educator, and then as scholar of education. In the following examples, I use fictional names for the students, and encourage readers to substitute the names of students close to their own current, or future, teaching experiences.

3.1 …the Words Whisper Stories

The first time I met Samuel was at the end of 2022. He was eight years old. His mother and auntie were concerned about his achievements at school: he was slow in reading and in math, generally lazy in doing homework on his own, and mainly interested in playing, at school as well as at home. We met during a trip with his older cousin, Nicholas, 11 years old, and the first boy I started to work with at my home; this was at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year. Samuel and Nicholas are as close as brothers since they live together. They were both born in Italy and are both Muslim; their families came from Morocco.

The day I met Samuel, they were both on holiday, thus we could spend the whole morning visiting a small village close to our town of Viterbo, in Central Italy. It was Christmas time; the boys were familiar with Christmas, and its Christian meaning.

I asked Samuel to read aloud a poster explaining the history of the main monument in the village. He did his best, with energy and will, but then he confessed a dislike of reading, which he considered "boring." His cousin Nicholas loved to read and had no problems at school, despite his mother's concerns. Nicholas was interested in every subject, both curious and passionate, enjoying learning new things, particularly in the humanities.

During the Christmas holidays, I introduced the two boys to the public library. They were astonished by its beauty: modern and quiet, with orange walls, and a large, colorful, deserted reading room for children. Samuel immediately considered that room "his favorite place"; Nicholas skimmed through the pages of books as he wished to read them all.

That room became "ours" for the rest of the school year. We went there once a week, for the whole afternoon, first with the two boys together, then separately, two hours each, with a break for a snack in the middle, something I prepared and brought for them. We had "our" desk, which was usually free, as the other young readers were generally few and mostly stayed for only a short time. We became familiar with the employees of the library, who were fascinated by the interest, joy, and politeness of the two.

When we visited the library the first time, the boys prepared a drawing for the employees thanking them for the "wonderful time" they had in that "magic place," as they wrote on it. The employees were touched, and immediately replied to their gift by providing each of them library cards. These allowed the boys to borrow books any time, for the rest of their lives, thus, they could read without the need to buy books. We called this card "the passport to freedom," and I explained to the boys its value as a tool for their entire families. They felt at home in the library, a safe place to stay, in silence and no rush, which was always open, free, full of light and space, with wonderful books on shelves set at their height, which they learned to reshelve on their own.

Samuel slowly discovered the pleasure and the beauty of reading, and to understand it as a way of meeting with the protagonists in a story as well as their author, who could all become his friends.

The first book which Samuel chose to read was an illustrated story of five cousins, about his age, which reminded him of his own family. We read it together, week by week, both captured by the magnificent drawings and the story. I taught Samuel to use the dictionary, and I prepared a notebook for him, in which he could write the meaning of new words, in alphabetical order. The value of this exercise was multiple: improvement in reading and in writing, as well as learning to look up new terms and their meaning in the children's illustrated dictionary.

Samuel waited all week for the appointment in the "colorful reading room," with "his new

friends," as he called the protagonists of the story. He talked about the book with his family and with his closest peers. He borrowed the book and asked the adults of his family to read it aloud to him. He also became faster about doing homework on his own during the week, due to spending time at the library reading. We examined some chapters several times, and observed illustrations in depth, as Samuel loves to draw and to color. We laughed at the stories in this book, which was slowly changing his life: his writing and reading were improving, his achievement at school and at home increased, his vocabulary was enriched, all as he gained an interest in reading.

By the time Samuel and I had finished this book, Nicholas had read a dozen volumes in the children's section. I proposed that they share the pages they read weekly, as a way to learn to read aloud, to tell a story, and to summarize the content. Samuel's explanations were rich, funny, and detailed, while those of Nicholas were fast and brief, for he preferred not to "waste such short time useful for reading more." His favorite topics were philosophical matters: big questions for little readers. We discussed a variety of issues, from bullying to interreligious dialogue, from war to the Holocaust, through and with the library books.

When we finished Samuel's first book, we celebrated with chocolate. Then, we began the same book all over again, as he did not want to "separate from my friends." I checked online if the author had written other volumes and discovered a trilogy having the same protagonists. I shared this news with the boys, who were enthusiastic: they soon informed the employees of the library, who occasionally asked their opinions of books as feedback. As a special present for Samuel, the library bought the two other volumes, thus the trilogy was complete. He was the first reader to borrow them, and the librarians extended the due date, thus allowing him to finish reading them all.

Weekly afternoons in the library

We read all three volumes repeatedly during the school year, but the first one remained in Samuel's heart. I proposed that he write a letter to the author, with a drawing, thanking him for having written such a wonderful book, given that it had changed his life. I contacted the publisher of the book, and shared this story, which was becoming a fable. The

publisher and the author were touched; they soon replied to us, which amazed the boys.

I asked the author if he intended to present the latest volume somewhere in Central Italy as we would love to participate. This time the gift came from the author: the next presentation would be in Rome in a couple of weeks. The boys and Nicholas' parents and I joined the book reading, in an unforgettable and exciting afternoon. Everyone's joy was palpable, including that of the author when he met the boys. He embraced them as if they were the special guests of the day, and we took photographs of the event.

In the days before the presentation, I asked Samuel to think of a question for the author, and to prepare a further drawing for him as his personal gift. All the young audience members had the complete trilogy, and they intended to ask the author to write a dedication at the end of the presentation. As our books came from the public library, the author could not sign the copies, and so we did not bring them to Rome. I explained to Samuel that this was why we prepared the drawing, and that the dedication might be the right moment for gifting it to the author. When it came our turn, the author was touched by Samuel's present. He immediately stopped the queue and ran to a box: he took a copy of the brochure describing his trilogy, which he autographed for the boys with a personal dedication.[3]

3.2 …the Numbers Inspire Drawings

Another weak point in Samuel's knowledge when I met him were the times tables. He could not memorize them, and therefore he was slow in multiplication, and division, and disliked them.

At the beginning of the 2023-24 school year, I proposed to Samuel that we work together once a week for three hours, with a break in the middle.

The children's reading room at the library was closed for renovations, so we met a few times in the adult study room, but we could not talk there. Since we had to be able to speak aloud, we worked instead at my home, and I designed a dense program. The first part of every lesson was dedicated to mathematics, alternating arithmetic with geometry. Then we took a break, usually eating snacks I had made. After the break came reading, including a fable by Mark Twain – *The Prince and the Pauper*; and then some form of art, choosing between drawing and music, either singing or learning the basics of playing guitar. Finally, we completed the afternoon with the essentials of using a computer.

I prepared a notebook for Samuel dedicated to math, similar to the one for improving his vocabulary and writing, divided into topics, so that arithmetic was separate from geometry. Then, I compiled another notebook for

music, with the lyrics for singing and guitar arrangements of the most popular children's songs, in both Italian and English.

I started the math lesson using a color-coded scheme of the times tables. Some were particularly difficult for him, others easy to remember. I highlighted the common numbers by circling them with the same colors, as a way of introducing him to connections among numbers, the meaning of multiple and submultiple, and the basic notion of divisibility, along with its criteria.

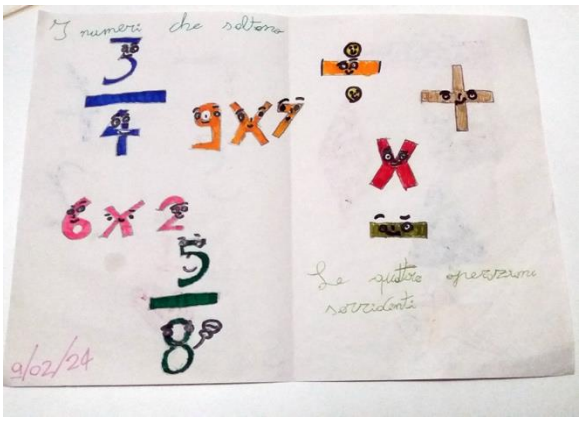
Samuel loves colors, and he is brilliant when he feels listened to and cared for. His visual memory slowly improved; we repeated the times tables at the beginning of every lesson, until he became confident and sure. Then, I asked him questions, jumping from one table to another, gradually increasing the speed and difficulty. Over a couple of months, he memorized all of the times tables because this exercise became a challenge for him, a competition with himself: he answered with enthusiasm and involvement, never tired or bored, and he became faster at mathematics in school too. He started to have fun with the times tables, and with counting: math was slowly becoming a form of play, and one he liked.

The same thing happened with geometry, a topic almost unknown to him at the beginning of the school year. We started by learning accuracy in tracking segments, angles, using an appropriate tool (a little square) which he could easily handle. The polygons slowly found a place in his notebook, and in his mind: over the following months, we covered the basics for almost all of plane geometry.

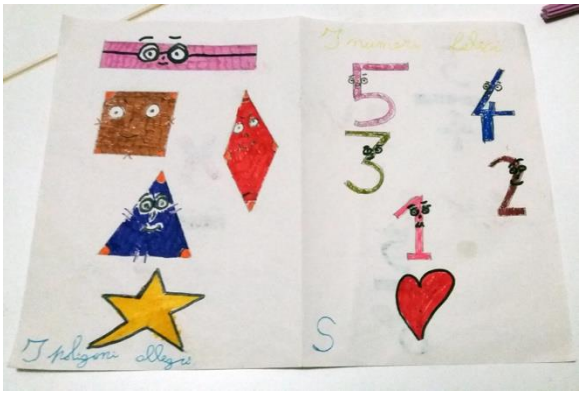
At the end of the lesson dedicated to quadrilaterals, Samuel was captured by the trapezoid; as for the triangle, he was intrigued by the adjective "scalene," and especially by its diversity. He loved this "originality," as the two polygons (the scalene triangle, and trapezoid) both have different sides and angles when compared with the other polygons. They appeared, to Samuel's eyes, different from the others, thus, unique, just as he felt unique compared with his peers (given his family, culture, and faith).

He felt "close to the scalene triangle and trapezoid," as he claimed, due to identifying with these two polygons; they appeared to him "upstream [that is, going against the tide] and naughty [that is, unexpected] just like me," as he said. The scalene triangle and trapezoid thus became his favorite polygons.

After our break on the same day Samuel learned this lesson, he asked me if he could draw polygons during the time dedicated to art, as he had an idea. In his beautiful mind, numbers and polygons stood in relation to one another, and he imagined them smiling and jumping. He gave a name to each number, created a story, and decided which ones were friends in their group or with the polygons.



Jumping numbers



Happy polygons

Robert, Margaret, and Jodie also had difficulties with mathematics and geometry. Robert and Margaret are Italian; I met Robert when he was 12, for a few lessons during the spring of 2022.

Margaret was 18 at the time; I supported her in several matters across the 2022-23 school year in preparing for the final exam for her high school diploma.

Jodie was 11 when I met her at the end of 2023; she was born in Italy into a Moroccan family.

All of them, in different ways, appeared frightened, fragile and uncertain, with low self-confidence, not only in mathematics. They needed to establish the basics: writing numbers, drawing polygons, and counting. For all of them math was a nightmare, an obstacle too big to face alone, and too distant from their daily lives to appreciate its importance. It was necessary that we work on the fundamentals, in the most trusting and serene atmosphere possible.

Sad episodes of bullying at school for Robert; general lack of motivation, and anxiety about earning a diploma for Margaret; learning difficulties for Jodie, associated with emotional fragility. These kept all of them far from mathematics, which they saw as useless: they only wished to do the minimum required to pass.

I worked in different ways with each of them; the one-to-one relationship allowed me to find the code of communication, which was different for each student. Robert, for instance, loved music; he had learned to play several instruments on his own, and was passionate about rock music. We discovered similar tastes in rock bands, which became the common ground for approaching geometry and arithmetic. Music could be a cure for his wounds, a safe space, in addition to my home. He felt "understood, relaxed, and stronger," as his parents told me: "We saw him so calm when he came back after your lesson."

Mathematics was hard for Robert as he had missed crucial lessons due to episodes of bullying. He felt uncomfortable with the new math teacher, and suffered during every lesson, feeling she did not evaluate him appropriately. His stress increased during the last few months of school, until one day he ran away. His mother was just bringing him to me for a lesson, but he disappeared, and she called me in tears. The tension of that period was hurting the entire family, she said, and she was worried and upset. I got her permission to call Robert on his mobile phone, although he had not answered when she had called. I tried, and he answered. He explained that he had taken his bike and was nearby, close to the city center. I proposed that we meet, to talk a bit, without mentioning mathematics, and he agreed. I informed his mother and then connected with Robert.

We spent several hours together, walking towards one of the best homemade ice cream shops in town. I mainly listened, sharing with him information about emotions, inner conflicts, and the effects and origin of hate and violence, which naturally and sadly exist around us, but often also inside, and which we must learn to face. At the end of this walk, Robert went home, appearing more relaxed and calmer. His mother texted me: "I do not know what you told him, but he embraced me when he arrived and apologized. He seems another boy." Robert continued to work on his own, always with much effort required for math, but "ready enough to face it," as he told me at the beginning of high school in the humanities.

Margaret had difficulties in all scientific matters. She asked me for help in math, physics, and chemistry, as well as English. We had only two hours per week, and the challenge was demanding for me.

I asked some alumni and early career researchers in my town to support me, in order to optimize time and resources, but no one was available to donate their time. I decided to accept the challenge on my own, as Margaret's good will was as huge as her gaps.

I prepared a plan, with a program mainly based on helping her with English: the grammar was almost unknown to her, the pronunciation remote, and the study of literature seemed impossible under these conditions. Part of her oral exam was supposed to be in English, focused on modern and contemporary English literature, therefore I thought it appropriate to give priority to this topic. Mathematics and physics were not included in the written and oral exams, but she needed to earn the minimum score for admission to the exam. We had to achieve that, yet it sounded like a difficult challenge.

I could only work on the fundamentals given such a limited time with her: the basics of just a few aspects of scientific matters, and English grammar.

She studied hard, with no rest, by taking advantages of weekends, holidays, and even days scheduled for a class trip, as she did not participate. The weekly two hours were mainly devoted to work, with short conversations, and a brief teatime.

It seemed that Margaret's life was silent before this last year: she had never been on a train or taken other means of transportation; never visited Rome, less than 100 kilometers from our town; never been to a museum, concert, theatre, or other towns and villages apart from the immediate surroundings. She would be the first in her family to complete high school, and she had few plans for the future. Instead, she had only a dream: to survive the final exam and earn a diploma. For her, the glass seemed half-empty, with few hopes and ideas, either for the present or the future. Nevertheless, she loved history, and she was fascinated by geopolitics, especially the complexity of the Mediterranean area. She was interested in helping others, particularly in the Middle East. I had found an exception to her apparently "nothing special" vision of the world, a phrase she used to answer my questions. We could start from there.

A few weeks before the written exam, we completed basic English grammar, with a rough idea of the meaning of easy sentences, quite far from an ability to translate literary passages. We had no choice and no time for hesitating, thus I tried to summarize the most important aspects of the authors we covered through keywords and conceptual maps. In the meanwhile, surprisingly, her score in chemistry and physics was high enough for admission to the exam. Mathematics remained hostile and upsetting, but her effort and determination brought the final positive result for which we had hoped. The written and oral exams were another collection of miracles, as we worked on finalizing the last details up to and including the day before. Her final score touched both of us: it was totally unexpected. She had made her best effort and was rewarded.

Another astonishing result was her choice to continue to study. We talked about the university only at the end of her degree: my suggestion was a faculty in humanities in our town, especially appropriate in that it would reduce the costs, otherwise impossible for her family. She could benefit from a university grant for tuition and expenses for the whole first year. She chose the faculty of Political Science, in our town, with a program especially oriented to the international field.

Her first year was brilliant: she passed all her exams on time, completing them before summer. The grant will be extended for her second year, with projects, dreams, and wishes for the future.
While having tea together at my home, between the two semesters of her first year, Margaret told me she felt free, finally happy to study, although she was also exhausted from the effort.

She passed her exam in English on the second

attempt, never mind if she earned the lowest grade. And she passed her exam in Political Economy, "full of formulas, and numbers" as she said, "but which I understood, for the first time. I did not consider math so disgusting, at the end."

Jodie lost her father at the age of seven. She has a younger brother, with a mental illness, who was a baby at that time. This sudden trauma shocked her, and she seemed blocked, unable to look forward: she escaped to an inner world, mainly of memories, especially related to Morocco, where her family used to spend summer holidays. It looked like she did not want to grow up, was unhappy to learn, and unready for all the changes that age, school, and life were preparing for her, as her mother tried to explain to me in an uncertain Italian when we first met. Soon after this loss, they moved from a small town near Rome where they used to live, to a small village close to Viterbo, where Jodie completed primary school. Her brother enrolled in a program provided by the local health authority, receiving support from specialists.

I had limited experience with fragile students, mostly related to graduate students, thus people at least double Jodie's age. However, during the pandemic, I had the opportunity to discover the work of an Italian scholar who had dedicated his life and research to a psychiatric treatment for fragility based on kindness and listening (Borgna, 2017; 2018). I had started to study his ideas over the last few years, as they could be useful for better understanding my relationship with doctoral students. I took inspiration from these volumes in trying to build a bridge with Jodie.

At the beginning of our time together, Jodie looked down, spoke little and quickly, and her voice was so low to be almost imperceptible. She was tall and slender, and seemed lost in another world, with short, frequent gaps in memory, often distracted, and disoriented.

She needed to start again learning to write letters and numbers, as her handwriting was almost illegible; furthermore, she hardly counted, and that by using her hands. Her notebooks were messy, full of erasures and torn pages.

I prepared a notebook for her to use in our lessons, and I used color, as previously described for Samuel, to construct an outline of the times tables. She liked colors, but her pencil case was often dirty, with a broken pen and no functional markers. Her bag seemed to reflect what was inside of her: confusion, weakness, fear.

The use of colors helped her at different levels, but we were still far from familiarity with the times tables. Her visual memory slowly unlocked; she started to recognize the connections among numbers and became more confident using the four operations. I could introduce her to the meaning of multiples

and submultiples and their implications, particularly in terms of the criteria for divisibility.

By the end of 2023, Jodie had memorized the times tables and, despite the effort expended, she seemed more serene, and happy to come once a week. She appreciated the break in our sessions and started to eat a bit more, discovering new tastes: from half a biscuit in the first weeks to bread with chocolate, fruits, and different kind of homemade cakes later.

She usually took the bus to get to my home, with her mother. At the beginning of 2024, Jodie took the further step of travelling on her own, I would wait for her at the bus stop and accompany her back there at the end of our lesson. Another step in her progress was to memorize how to reach my home on her own: she achieved that landmark before spring.

In the meantime, we continued to work on mathematics, and its connections: from the times tables to divisibility, towards a better understanding of prime factors. We also established a basis for the comprehension of the least common multiples, which allowed her to manage fractions by the end of the school year.

Jodie seemed more confident; even at school, with her peers and teachers, she felt more accepted and comfortable. Oral questions and talking in front of her peers were still demanding for her, but she was happy to go to school, and joined her first class fieldtrip with enthusiasm.

The first part of our lesson was dedicated to an update of the past week's activities, which functioned as a further exercise in sharing, talking aloud, and self-confidence. She usually shared many events in detail, showing me her drawings, poetry, and written compositions related to Italian literature class. I noticed that her writing was slowly improving, and the subjects and colors of her drawings were becoming more serene: from dark, obscure, and mysterious designs to smiling and joyful themes, often in color.

Jodie's final score was positive in all topics: the teachers and school psychologist appreciated and supported her work, and they cared about her throughout the year. They included her mother in this helping network, something she shared with me in our weekly conversations.

At the end of the school year, Jodie's happiness was visible: I visited her before they left to spend the summer holiday in Morocco, and she ran towards me, uncaring of cars driving in the street. She was excited to share with me her last school day, when students prepared a show for their families: she was the lead in her class performance. The English teacher proposed that Jodie take the role of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*: she successfully sang in English, and she looked luminous.

3.3 …and the Letters Dance and Sing

Sarah and Rachel are the youngest students, and the last ones to knock at my door: they are sisters, four and five years old, who arrived in July 2024. They were born in Italy, as was their elder brother who is seven, to Nigerian parents. They have no relatives in Viterbo, only some co-nationals, and a small local support network.

They arrived together, once a week, and I tried to introduce them to the alphabet, and to numbers. During the three hours of morning lessons, indeed, they could learn much, with increasingly quick improvements. Initially, they had very little Italian vocabulary: some words were distorted, or nonexistent; others were a mix between the Nigerian Pidgin spoken at home, and the Italian learned at school. As their parents barely speak Italian, the result is frequently a mix of languages among the three children.

They were immediately curious, becoming familiar with my living room, our lesson room: plants, furniture, paintings, as well as pictures and magnets on the fridge, soon captured their imagination. I started from these elements in proposing practical activities, and creating a lesson they could understand, apply, and memorize.

Then, I prepared a notebook for each of them, to accompany our lesson and document their advances, without the need for books or other teaching tools which were nearly absent from their home. They could find everything they needed in my home, leaving everything with me over the next week, instead of carrying it back and forth.

Our lesson started with the plants inside the room and on the balcony: the names, shapes and colors of the flowers attracted their curiosity, especially the opportunity to take care of each of them. They soon learned to water them, remove dry leaves, and keep them clean. Furthermore, they learned to appropriately sort waste, separating paper and plastic from organic waste on their own.

The next step was to show them the life cycle of the plants, which allowed me to introduce the seasons as a metaphor for periods of human life.

Their level of attention was surprisingly high for the practical activities. Everything seemed new to them, yet they could immediately memorize the instructions and the explanations. I balanced these practical instructions by teaching them new words and helping them to become aware of the sounds of letters. None of this was familiar to them; I realized that they were not used to the sound of letters.

Furthermore, they did not seem to sing at school and very little at home. I taught them a song and a dance, from scouting, the same

one presented to Samuel. They took a couple of lessons to learn the melody, and two more for memorizing the words, which I repeated several times. Watching them dance, I learned that they usually do not dance, either at school or at home, although they have an innate sense of rhythm. After almost a month, they had learned two songs, and memorized multiple sets of movements, which we now practice before drawing.

They were not confident in their use of pencil and eraser; they just used the markers, or pastels, and scribbled, in order to finish quickly. We dedicated time to learning to draw familiar subjects, quite often their parents, or flowers, hearts, and rainbows. At the beginning, the use of pencil and eraser was a bit frustrating for them, as they were unaccustomed to slow and precise activities. However, when they observed the results in their notebook, they were happy and satisfied, and started to appreciate the required effort.

I tried to keep things interesting for them by teaching different techniques of drawing and coloring (paper collage, and mosaic design, recycling materials I had at home). They were enthusiastic about using scissors, stapler, hole punch, and glue on their own, and enjoyed discovering new art techniques.

We dedicated each lesson to a different letter of the alphabet, using plastic letters with magnets on the refrigerator as the board. Following Montessori's method, we first worked on touch: I put the letters in a small bag, and they had to take them out with eyes closed, one after the other, to help them memorize the shape of the letters and begin to associate the shape with the sound.

Then, they drew in their notebook or cut and pasted images from magazines and newspapers of objects starting with the letter we learned. In this way they could work on the senses – touch, hearing, and sight – and apply what they learned in a creative and practical way. I taught them capital letters, writing the name of each object under their drawing.

Some of their work

Halfway through their lesson, we took break time, their favorite moment: either for discovering new flavors, or setting the table. They loved this activity, as they felt free to do it on their own, and we could work on taste and smell. In this way they experienced all five senses every lesson. They progressively learned what went where on the table: placemats, plates, knives, paper towels, as well as how to wash dishes, in addition to cleaning up the table and the floor after the break. They adored working by themselves and climbed on a little ladder to reach the sink. I

followed them, reminding them of the steps to follow, but leaving them to complete each task on their own, something that does not happen either at school or at home.

In a few weeks, their advances increased, and the older sister especially memorized vowels and some consonants; both learned to draw with pencil and eraser, and to use markers appropriately, by coloring with patience and order. They remained focused on drawing and coloring, sometimes singing what they learned, or asking me for new songs. They also learned to use the bathroom on their own, and to keep it clean themselves, and not to fear being alone.

3.4 A precious network

The techniques I use with children and teens are also based on sustainability. The choices to work at home and in public spaces, as with the library, adhere to this. Doing so offers students and their families concrete examples of a possible approach to study, and more broadly to the culture, which is open, accessible to everyone, and free. Neither indoor nor outdoor activities entail any costs for the students' families. When traveling for day trips, as described with Samuel and Nicholas, we generally visit the surroundings, thus using my car, or public transit, mainly train and bus, which offers reduced tickets for children.

I try to plan visits to museums on the first Sunday of the month, which results in free admission in Italy (this holds across Sundays all year, as well as on civil and religious holidays). For other visits, such as the botanic or zoological gardens, children's ticket prices are reduced. In addition, I usually recommend a picnic lunch on trips, which allows me to educate the kids about sustainability. This includes using paper wrappers instead of plastic, for instance, or taking water bottles, which we may fill at public drinking fountains. These choices were not common for them in the beginning. The habit of exchanging homemade sandwiches is useful for discovering new tastes, makes the kids curious and happy to share, without any waste, and respects the environment. They learn to appreciate genuine flavors, and slowly come to prefer them to supermarket snacks; they involve their families in this discovery, and sometimes they prepare sandwiches together the day before a trip.

I taught them to take the train, the tube, and the bus, to check the timetable and to buy a ticket, all new activities for them, as our town is small, and they can typically get around either on foot or by car. These trips also help them become more aware of the importance of traveling, the possibility of visiting wonderful places, and to discover new things with little expense, as on our trips we do not really need to buy anything, since we bring the essentials with us.

Sustainability is also a key concept at home, as the breaks in lessons generally include

homemade food, respectful of Muslim tradition, which interests most of the students I have. They taught me the basic *halal* rules which characterize Islamic daily life, especially in terms of food. The families appreciate my effort to adapt shared meals to their needs, and I am happy to use these moments as a further occasion for deepening intercultural dialogues and bridging cultures. We also share respect for Ramadan, by scheduling no trips and no breaks during lessons over the holiday.

The costs related to sport and music activities, which some of these students could join during the 2023-24 school year, were supported by a wonderful network, including junior scholars, my alumni, and friends.

The idea of a grant supporting motivated students with low incomes first came from a former student of mine. At the end of 2019, she proposed creating a fund for me, to help Ph.D. students in need to participate in a course on the communication of scientific research, which I was organizing at that time. Her idea was to donate an annual contribution, on her own, instead of looking for the support of private or public sponsors, and to propose the same to my current graduate students, in addition to alumni. She was the first donor, and, since 2019, she has continued to contribute every year, as she strongly believes in the teaching program I am carrying out. During these several years, this grant allowed the participation of four doctoral students into the courses I have taught.

In 2023, I proposed to this young researcher to convert the grant into one supporting the activities of younger students, the children and teens I was helping, and she agreed. She is in charge in managing this grant, keeping track of donations that still arrive every year. The supporters have asked to remain anonymous, seeing their act as "ordinary," as one told me. Despite respecting their request, I cannot avoid sharing a few stories, as they may suggest a possible path for someone else.

One donation came from a friend who loves classical music: her sons and daughters used to be musicians, and she encouraged Nicholas to start learning piano. She loaned him the keyboard that belonged to her sons. In addition, she donated enough to cover piano lessons. The experience of piano for Nicholas lasted only six months, as he did not feel involved with the instrument; he worked hard at school, and at basketball. He stopped the music lessons, but was sincerely grateful to this woman, calling her "my benefactor."

Another donation came from a friend who loves sports. She works for a public swimming pool in a small village close to our town. Her support allowed some of the children to take swimming lessons for free. Together with her colleagues, they admitted Nicholas' sister, who is four years old, and offered the same opportunity to Jodie and her brother. In the end, they were not able to participate, but they still appreciated the offer. For the 2024-2025 school year, the staff at the swimming pool renewed their offer of free swimming

lessons, extending the offer also to karate and rhythmic gymnastics as appropriate.

Two other friends donated their sons' bicycles, which were almost new, as they had hardly used them. These were the first bikes Samuel and Nicholas ever had.

The grants from early career researchers allowed me to cover the fees for basketball for Samuel and Nicholas, for chorus for Samuel, and a music laboratory course for Nicholas' sister. They could join the music lessons at Viterbo's experimental private music school, which specializes in teaching music to babies, children, and teens.

Furthermore, even the costs of the one-day trips were covered by this grant, thus I had no expenses for these activities.

I shared these stories with the children and their families, as we could not have continued without this support. This gave me the opportunity to explain to them the value of this network of friendships and relationships based on reciprocal trust and faith in education, as all the "benefactors" were educators, parents, teachers, early career researchers, or people involved in volunteering themselves.

4. "Homemade" Teaching as an Updated "I Care"

There are common aspects to the stories I have presented, which may help to identify the essential characteristics of this "homemade" teaching. They can be summarized in the following keywords: "inter" – as it is an *inter*cultural, often *inter*religious, and always *inter*disciplinary training; but it is also *inter*generational, as it is addressed to students of different ages, and to their families. *Inter* in the original Latin means "between and across," as it intends to encounter and bridge diversities which are, and may become, a source of richness.

Far more broadly, the aim is to go beyond all these forms of difference, evident in the etymology of the Latin prefix *trans*, which adds "beyond" to *inter's* two meanings of "between" and "across." This is what I am accustomed to experiencing in teaching junior researchers (Mangano, 2018), and something that I hope to be able to share also with children and teens.

Another keyword of this approach is "inclusive," in the sense Buber proposed, thus an approach that aims to include students, with their inner and familial world, as well as to understand, to contain, and to embrace them. This implies constant care, in listening to them, in finding the right words also for their families, the gentlest possible, which may also cure their wounds, or at least mitigate them.

Taking this perspective, this approach points especially to the inclusion of the most fragile students, who suffer due to a lack of means, at multiple levels, and require particular attention, as their families ignore, or are unable

to cope with, their needs beyond essential material necessities.

"Care," "cure," and "competence" may summarize this behavior, as a unique keyword, which entails study, creativity, humility. and patience from educators, who may learn much more from the students than we think to teach them.

These three "c's" go together with "attention" and "awareness" in teaching, just as in every human relationship, especially when the other is voiceless and helpless, unable to protect themselves. Therefore, "attention," "awareness," and "respect" may be considered as one, a distinctive attitude and a sole keyword underlying "relationship" and "education" as well as "educational relationship."

If we list these keywords in a similar order, they recall the letters of Lorenzo Milani's slogan "I care":

I	Inter-, inclusion
C	Care, cure, competence
A	Attention, awareness, attitude, approaching the other
R	Respect, relationship
E	Education, educator

These terms may be read as an up-to-date acronym, "I CARE," made up of the characteristics that I have experienced in my teaching. They may be relevant to every level of education, independent of the students' age, the type of school, and the subject matter taught. Thus, we can use letters to represent the relevant qualities, updated to the current time, having necessarily different needs from Milani's time.

Although a different context from university courses, probably for most of the students we meet, we need to remember to travel at a student's own pace. This implies that we must adjust our rhythm to each of them, no matter whether they are slow or quick, as the speed depends on the students, rather than on the curriculum, the level of the class, or the amount of time available. Every student takes their own path, based on several variables – familial, social, cultural, but also economic, emotional, psychological – supporting their capacity to learn.

Age, sensibility, openness of mind, ability to expose themselves, as well as background, experience, and attitude to study are generally seen as common to a cohort of students, and typical of everyone in a class. However, the risk is to consider these aspects as "standard," and to homogenize the students into a uniform audience, needing to walk at the same speed, throughout the entire school year. Under these conditions, a teacher risks being limited to finding the common travel speed, and to using the same pace with the entire class, in the process flattening their diversities and, thus, their richness.

In teaching students of different ages and un-

der various conditions, I have observed instead that their needs are frequently unpredictable, and may change during the school year, as well as their answers, understanding, and interests. These fortuitous and unexpected aspects may suggest adapting our pace to theirs, as educators. As when we walk over a mountain, we should adjust to the rhythm of the slowest, who should be the first in climbing, rather than the last.

The idea, the provocation, may be to think (or re-think) the relationship between the student and the teacher as a one-to-one encounter, from the first day of lessons to the last. Interacting with students is a privilege, rather than a burden, which should include their families, hopefully, and other teachers, in a network of mutual exchange, the basics of reciprocity.

This challenge is naturally demanding, as it requires determining and keeping to the conditions for a relational approach in education all the time. Nevertheless, this opportunity may suggest that learning is part of the innate capacity of human beings, and that students – as well as their families – have already experienced, in some fashion, at least some of what we aim to teach them.

As mentioned previously, Dolci took inspiration from the Socratic concept of *maieutic*, or education as a process, which points to bringing knowledge to light – even wisdom, for the philosopher – from the student. The Latin etymology of the verb "to educate" is close: *ex ducere*, thus, bringing (*ducere*) out (*ex*) something from someone. The educator is responsible for assuring the conditions of this "birth"; and learning may be considered as the result of this effort, over the whole life of the learner thus, learning as an endless process.

According to a Jewish teaching called *Midrash*, human beings understand the entire universe and have complete knowledge of the *Torah* before birth. When they are born, an angel touches their lips, making them forget everything. In this perspective, life is considered to be a process moving towards knowledge and experience, through which all of us can learn, as we keep in mind traces of the memory of our original knowledge.

These ancient Greek and Jewish traditions seem to confirm that education is a lifelong process, based on the effort of the educator, in relationship with the student. The teacher may provide help, as a tool for building bridges, with the awareness that at least some of what they may teach is already inside the student, as a track, a memory, and a compass, both for the educator, and for the student.

5. Towards a "we care" approach to teaching

The one-to-one, "homemade," and relational approach to teaching described in this paper was designed for children in need and for their families.

At the beginning, this teaching seemed to happen by chance, as a fortuitous request of support for children and teens drawn from low-income and non-Italian families. As presented earlier, what initially appeared as an unexpected surprise, a fascinating unplanned program in my work and daily life, slowly increased my awareness and responsibility towards such unseen children and their families.

This awareness implied a choice at multiple levels: I realized, in fact, that this "homemade" teaching was something more than a volunteer activity, it became a full-time calling to support the Other, particularly Others in difficulty.

I decided to center these students - as I necessarily had to limit the number of the students to follow - to involve their families, and to primarily use my home as a space for building this educational relationship.

My purpose was to offer the children and their families a possible additional chance. As described in these pages, most of these adults are migrants who came to Italy to find a job; they have chosen to remain, despite the efforts required to face the cultural, economic, and social burdens taken on by any immigrant. Many of them feel backed into a corner, quite often made uncomfortable by the unstated assumptions in Italian society, school, and daily life.

Their children seem likely to be their lifelines, as the bridge to an ideal "standard" life in a non-native country, which these families both desire and actively pursue. The children feel their families' load, in addition to their longing for understanding their identity, inevitably different from either their families or their peers. I have chosen to help them to lighten their diverse and often invisible burdens.

The findings illustrated in these pages confirm that building a space of relationship with the students' families enriches their lives, in addition to those of their children.

Some of the adults told me that they could experience the activities I organized with their children thanks to their stories; they felt that they were really traveling with us, visiting a museum or the zoo, through our pictures, imagination, and sharing. For this reason, I printed the most meaningful pictures, and prepared a detailed photo album as a gift for the kids as well as for their families.

With the same aim, I prepared gifts for Christmas and Easter to the whole family, in addition to the children. Although many of the families are Muslim, and not accustomed to celebrating Christian festivities, their children love them, especially Christmas, as all their peers celebrate these events, and they want to experience them as their friends do. I made simple and symbolic presents using sustainable materials I had at home, which were highly appreciated by all of them. At the

same time, some of these families wished to demonstrate their gratitude, and gave me presents for Christian and Muslim feasts.

Our exchanges enriched our intercultural dialogue, by offering especially the adults the opportunity for sharing parts of their native culture, traditions, and faith. We celebrated together the beginning and the end of Ramadan, with traditional Moroccan dishes, which they prepared for my family and me. They invited me for lunch in their home on some special occasions, and cooked couscous and pastries during the year to thank me. In the same way, the youngest children's mother prepared and brought me Nigerian food for her daughters' birthdays, which we celebrated both in my home and in theirs.

Even the choice of opening my home implied constantly highlighting people in need, drawn from different cultures, often with a hard past and a demanding present: they are the Other, thus, the foreigner, the poor one, the one frequently considered as *other than us*. Home is typically thought of as a private space, something intimate, reserved for family, friends, and neighbors, thus usually for persons close to us, the ones considered *people like us*. Therefore, this choice implies a change in perspective, the intention to open our hearts, and minds, in addition to our doors, thus, donating time, energies, competencies, as well as listening, suggestions, and empathy; in one word: love. For free. What is generally addressed to "our dear ones," as we commonly say, becomes – or has the potential to become – accessible to the Other, for whom we are asked to dedicate the same care, attention, and time, without involving either formal institutions or the support of charity associations. It involves individuals in the community looking out for and integrating new members of the group.

Thus, home, our home, is conceived of as a space *for* and *with* the Other, especially the ones who are metaphorically sitting in the last seats on the bus. Home as a space *of* and *for* relationship, a space that allows building a safe, comfortable, and pleasant place for a relational education. Moreover, home as a quiet and serene space, where it is possible to study, to play, to sing, to draw and to dance, to discover what may be inside and outside the students, and to teach them to work on their own. In a word: a place to be the protagonists and to feel at home, sometimes even more than in their own actual homes, as some of them told me.

The conditions for developing this relational teaching – the one-to-one relationship with the students, a constant involvement with their families, the choice to work at home as a safe space in which the students feel like protagonists – hardly can be achieved at school, or through an association which supports kids in their studies. In classes with a dozen students, the attention of teachers and educators, as well as their care, time, and competence, inevitably should be addressed to all of them. Furthermore, in such a context,

it is very difficult to involve the families in a deep dialogue, especially those most in need.

The relational approach illustrated in these pages does not aim to substitute for school, nor for the realities experienced in supporting the students in their homework. However, it may provide a further educational tool, one which may complement the work of schools and associations. It may be realized at home, as well as outdoors, when possible, in public spaces suitable for children and teens.

This perspective implies imagining teaching and learning – and, far more broadly, education generally - as a process extended to the whole day, as it may continue at home, by involving the students' families. They need the support of diverse educators, who cannot be the teachers at school or from the associations, but who can accompany the whole family in this growth.

This vision may suggest a further step: as an updated "I care" to a "we care" approach. In this view, education may be seen as a collective, lifelong, and full-time process, one involving students and their families, and the teachers at school, as well as additional educators in a network of relationships.

If this "relational network" can include - as Buber intended - students and their families, it will be able to take responsibility for their load, by together addressing their concrete needs. It may result in an exercise in sharing and mutual solidarity able to involve other persons, not necessarily related to education associations or institutions, as the stories presented in this paper indicate.

This "we care" approach may start at home, by opening our doors to children and families in difficulty, those around us, for example, in our own building, street, or section of town; and this approach may require only a little time, as quality outweighs quantity in this approach.

What begins apparently by chance, may involve other educators, as well as, far more broadly, people interested in teaching and learning, studying and helping the ones in difficulty in a virtuous circle.

The aim would be a relational network able to build a community, literally, a group of persons who carry out their tasks together, or who share their gifts together. The term "community," in fact, originates from the Latin *cummunitas,* derived from *communis,* thus *cum* (with) *munus,* which means either "task," or "gift."

In this perspective, the "we care" approach to teaching may lead to a community able to assume responsibility for the Other, especially for those in need. This relational network shares duties as well as gifts, which implies a mutual care, a reciprocal exchange of roles in which everybody donates and receives from the Other. Therefore, teachers and educators may receive support from their students, as

well as adults (especially parents of their students) from children. In such a way, this relational network may extend and become borderless, thus, "without any boundaries," either for students or for their families, as well as for the school and for teachers. It might result in discovering that for other students and for their families, the letters also sing and the numbers also jump.

To cite this article, use this format:

Mangano, Maria Flora. (2024, November 11). When the letters sing and the numbers jump: Education as a space of relationship. *In Dialogue: Center for Intercultural Dialogue Occasional Papers, 2.* https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2024/11/11/in-dialogue-cid-occasional-papers-2-when-the-letters-sing-and-the-numbers-jump-education-as-a-space-of-relationship/

References

Baldwin, J. R., Faulkner, S. L., Hecht, M. L., & Lindsley, S. L. (2006). *Redefining culture: Perspectives across the disciplines.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bordin, M., Coiro A., Fontana, G., Iannaccone, N., Langer, S., Maldifassi G., Meiani, A., & Sala, R. (2021). *Scuola Sconfinata. Proposta per una rivoluzione educativa.* [School outside the borders: Proposal for an educational revolution]. Milan, Italy: Feltrinelli. https://fondazionefeltrinelli.it/app/uploads/2021/06/Scuola_Sconfinata_.pdf

Borgna, E. (2017). *Le parole che ci salvano* [The words which save us]. Turin, Italy: Giulio Einaudi Editore.

Borgna, E. (2018). *L'ascolto gentile* [The kind listening]. Turin, Italy: Giulio Einaudi Editore.

Buber, M. (1967). Replies to my critics. In P. A. Schilpp & M. Friedman (Eds.), *The philosophy of Martin Buber* (pp. 689-744). LaSalle, IL: Open Court.

Buber, M. (1993). *Sull'educativo* [Education]. In *Il principio dialogico e altri saggi* [The dialogic principle and other essays] (A. Poma & A.M. Pastore, Trans.) (pp. 159-182). Milan, Italy: San Paolo Edition.

Cipolla, G. (2012). *Danilo Dolci e l'utopia possibile* [Danilo Dolci and the possible utopia]. Caltanissetta, Italy: Sciascia.

Lévinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Mangano, M. F. (2018). *Relationship as a space "in between": A transcultural and transdisciplinary approach mediated by dialogue in academic teaching.* Bergamo, Italy: University of Bergamo Press. https://aisberg.unibg.it/retrieve/handle/10446/130115/282469/CollanaSAFD_Volume1_2018.pdf

Mangano, M. F. (17 March 2022). *Guest post: Saturday morning (intercultural) school.* Center for Intercultural Dialogue. https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2022/05/02/maria-flora-mangano-saturday-morning-intercultural-school/

Mangano, M. F. (2023). *Le parole dei giovani Sisifo.* [The words of the young Sisyphus]. Trento, Italy: Edizioni del Faro.

Milani, L. (2017). *Tutte le opere.* [Complete works]. Milan, Italy: Mondadori.

Montessori, M. (2017). *La scoperta del bambino.* [The discovery of the child]. Milan, Italy: Garzanti. (Original publication 1948)

Notes

[1] And which I have described in part elsewhere (Mangano, 2022).

[2] Something I recently illustrated (Mangano, 2023).

[3] I described the details of this fable-story in a volume in Italian, as part of a chapter presenting my first teaching experiences with second-generation children and teenagers in need (Mangano, 2023). I have now added further notes about what else has happened since the publication of that chapter.