

## **Closing the Word Gap**

**2019-1-UK01-KA229-061373\_1**

**Virtual Study Visit Istituto Comprensivo Statale ad Indirizzo Musicale Palermo, Sicily**

**26<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021**

The objectives of the project are to:

- analyse and share existing strategies and resources for improving oracy to close the gap between disadvantaged learners and their peers
- identify common areas of strength and priorities for development
- undertake study visits to partner schools to investigate the policies and practice in the context of those schools
- use the outcomes of the study visits to improve provision and practice in identifying and addressing oracy disadvantage
- produce a report on the outcomes of each study visit, sets of case studies and recommendations for school policy
- disseminate the outcomes widely

The outputs of the project will be:

- An online platform hosting the project website, reports and case studies

- A set of case studies
- An impact report incorporating recommendations for school policy
- A dissemination strategy including examples of best practice, online materials and events in 4 countries

#### Attendees

IT – Alessandra Benanti, Claudia Musotto, Piranio Maria Rosa, Giovanna Vincenza Randisi, Rita Mancuso with contributions on

26th March 2021 from Elena La Rocca, Isabella Modica, Giacinta Salvatrice Ingrao

and on 31st March 2021 from Guardino Girolama, Profeta Gioacchina, Giacinta Salvatrice Ingrao

LV – Daiga Podkalna, Ineta Pitkevica, Inga Liepa, Vita Kursite, Santa Rosenberga, Agija Rosenberga and with contributions from Agris Dobrovolskis on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021

ES – Cristina Ponce, Anna Boras, Cristina Manzella, Clara Batista

UK – Kirsten Finley, Marie Byrne, Jan Linsley and with contributions from Paul Harrison on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021

## **Friday 26<sup>th</sup> March 2021 – Welcome and virtual tour of the school facilitated by the Principal, Alessandra Benanti**

### **Welcome and introductions**

We were warmly welcomed by Alessandra Benanti (AB) to the visit to her school which has 1200 children aged 3-13. The school has a mixed catchment with its challenges, but a happy school, with staff working hard to improve the lives of the children. AB looks forward to spending time with each other but expresses disappointment that the pandemic has meant that this has to be a virtual visit. We visited Simone Sunseri's class and we were welcomed by children in the class. The children told us about the island of Sicily and the city of Palermo. The next session was led by Elena La Rocca and Emilio, a pupil, and we watched a video introducing us to Sicily, the sights, the lifestyle, street food, the Sicilian Puppets and Mount Etna. We visited Giacinta Ingrao's classroom where we were welcomed by Greta, a pupil. The children introduced a song with flashcards in English and sang enthusiastically the traditional song "Rosa got Married." We visited Elena La Rocca's class and met Savatore, a pupil, who introduced us to the school. We then watched a short video introducing us to the school. Isabella Modica and her class welcomed us with a traditional dance, accompanied by chanting and drums. AB explained the extensive use of percussion in school. We then watched a video of a traditional dance, recording prior to lockdown, where the children were wearing traditional clothes. Many of the classrooms we visited had welcome posters on the wall to recognise our visit.

### **Introduction: the project in our school (Refer to PowerPoint 1 From theory to daily practice for further details).**

We were welcomed by Ginevra to Claudia Musotto's (CM) class and learnt what had been happening in the project in Palermo. CM explained that the project was to close the word gap and improve progress and outcomes for disadvantaged children. There are many disadvantaged pupils in the school and teachers work hard to close the gap. The focus is on vocabulary and children's literacy skills.

The project has been a real chance to fill the linguistic gap. The school's aim is to work on children's communicative skills to develop linguistic competence. Children have additional difficulty in learning Italian as Sicilian is a dialect and an identity. The school needs to develop the children as bi-lingual to interact with reality. Vocabulary is important to give the children access to the world. The project approach is linked to the "National Intentions 2012" for kindergarten. The approach is to use an "autobiographical methodology" to understand their identity and raise the self-esteem of the children. Based on metacognition and the ability to develop relationships with different personalities and cultures. It is also to learn the linguistic codes appropriate to gender, status, relationships. Storytelling is a very important way to create

identity; develop different ways of thinking; give meaning to the world and experience empathy.

Understanding stories is only the beginning, this needs to be internalised and used to develop long term memory related to language. Work on lexical enhancement is important in kindergarten – we use the words they know, learn new words and how to manipulate tenses, possession – in order to tell new stories to express themselves. Much of this is based on games, varied teaching strategies to foster motivation through enjoyment of learning and to increase the attention span as the children mature. The school believes that discovery is the best way to learn. Schemes of work are designed to promote children's curiosity. CM concludes the session by explaining that evaluation is formative involving parents and the long-term goal of their approach is to develop "future citizens."

Questions raised at the time included –

**How are classrooms organised?** Currently, primary children sit in rows of 2 children at each desk, with classes reduce to 12-14 pupils and called a "bubble." In kindergarten children sit round the same table and no masks in kindergarten.

**How do you deal with children who don't make the same progress as the rest of the class?** Based on analysis of children's knowledge and ability teachers try to get all class to same level before they start the storytelling stage. To support levelling up, stronger pupils help those who are struggling. Learning is always accessed through playing games and the teacher is part of the game too. There is a games mediator / visual support for the story to develop language. This is taken step by step for SEND to develop their self-confidence.

**What have you done to engage families in language learning? And how has this been affected by the pandemic?** During the pandemic we have sometimes had to work on-line even with Kindergarten children. Materials shared before the sessions and then parents and children work together with teachers. Teachers would guide parents in how to complete the activities with their children. Parents are encouraged to tell stories and answer the children's questions about what words and phrases mean.

### **Next steps for the project**

AB facilitated the final session of the day by talking about how the pandemic has changed many of the routines in school. Smaller classes, exclusive bubbles. Co-operation with families has changed for the better, with many parents recognising their responsibility in the learning process.

Latvian schools started distance learning in the middle of October and schools are still closed now. No decision has been made on whether children will return this academic year. Like everyone else, teachers faced with new challenges, some reluctant, but increasingly more confident. It is noticeable the difference when parents have taken an interest in home learning. A small number of shy children have grown in confidence. A lot of things can be done more effectively on-line and this has helped to prioritise the important. Work has become very efficient!

In England, schools re-opened to all pupils on 8th March. Teaching is conducted in class-sized bubbles. Before that disadvantaged / key worker children were in school whilst the rest of the children were taught remotely. Colleagues agreed that teachers have had to adapt and some of the new practices will continue. These might include meetings on-line, setting homework on on-line.

Spanish schools returned in Sept and children have been in school since then. Distance learning is provided only for those who have had to self-isolate. Staff and children are working in bubbles too. All have had to adapt to IT very quickly and have pushed themselves to do it. Use of masks has meant that staff have had to develop oral expression because face masks hide expressions. Staff have had to be very conscious of modelling exceptional communication with the children.

Finally, we watched a video of parents reading with their children. Rather than just listening to the adult reading, the children were encouraged to be very active in asking questions. Some parents have found difficulty in doing this and therefore some gaps in learning have appeared. Especially, if they didn't keep in touch. Some families haven't had devices, some have not taken up offers of devices / dongles and some have not kept in touch regularly. A small number of shy children, however, have engaged and improved their confidence and self-esteem. Teachers have been "forced" into using new technologies and learning new skills with some positive results.

Meeting closed with thanks and eagerness to return on Monday!

## **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

THE WORD TREE (Refer to **PowerPoint 2 The Word Tree** for further details).

CM led the session and introduced her colleagues who contributed. We were introduced to The Word Tree for 5 year olds, an intervention for

20 minutes twice a week, for 6 weeks. It is designed to support the children to speak Italian when their first language is Sicilian. Visual and verbal aspects are strongly linked closely together to support memory. The example we observed by video was the story of the Three Little Pigs. Colleagues could see children linking the initial letter of their name to its sound, as a sense of belonging. Flashcards were used to introduce new words such as chimney, straw bale and we saw the overt teaching of semantic fields to extend vocabulary. The intervention introduces AAC Augmented and Alternative Communication and its psychological function. The final stage of the intervention is the children's dramatization of the story. The results of the intervention were shared and it was possible to see the progress made by the children from their starting points.

Questions raised at the time included -

**Is this an intervention or for all children?** All children are evaluated on this approach.

**What about immigrants / refugees?** These children have similar difficulties to native children and therefore approach this in the same bi-lingual way. There are relatively low numbers of immigrants / refugees at this school.

**The Sensory Box** (Refer to **PowerPoint 3 The Sensory Box** for further details).

Mariarosa Piranio (MP) introduced the Sensory Box activity which is used with 3, 4 and 5 year old children and run over a similar period of time as The Word Tree. The approach was explained with the assistance of a PowerPoint presentation and video. In the video we could see the use of The Sensory Box and the stages of the activity. This intervention assesses pupils in a similar way to The Word Tree and colleagues could especially see the progress made by children in the middle ability group.

The session then followed with details of the underpinning psychological framework. The approach begins with a tactile experience to recognising shape; from sensory register into Short Term Memory (STM). Children move from STM to Long Term Memory through questions. Children make associations by sharing an episode from their own life. Working with memory on different levels children develop a story which provides structure and language elaboration. This helps children to understand different levels of meaning. The aim is to enhance the ability to experience, understand, describe qualities (limited number of colours / materials).

Questions raised at the time included -

**How do children respond to nonsense words in the light of Ebbinghaus's forgetting curve?** This is especially linked to the KS1 phonics check in England. The intervention responds to the need to build a sense of citizenship of Italian and the world to move beyond their own

neighbourhood through language.

**How is AAC helpful for children with SEND?** The school's approach is not to adapt the curriculum to meet needs but would like to develop an approach with suits everyone without "special" interventions.

**How are you able to delivered this with a full class?** Many young children have decided to stay at home. Early Years (EY) is not compulsory. The school has some additional teachers for EY and primary children. In secondary, classes are normal size (about 20 children to accommodate SEND children.

**Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021**

**Food** (Refer to **PowerPoint 4 Food** for further details).

Elena La Rocca introduced the intervention based on Food for the 3 -5 year old children in her class. The project focuses on nutrition, the sensorial and daily experience is used to enlarge children's vocabulary and their ability to communication and make presentations. Children at school eat together at lunch time. There is a focus on healthy eating as the children eat too much processed food and it empowers children to make healthy food decisions. The objectives are to develop good food habits which are conducive to health. The school engages with parents to improve their understanding too. Many children report not eating fruit and vegetables at home. Fruit is available in school almost all of the time. Children try fruit and vegetables in school, sometimes the first time, and eat it more willingly with their peers. Talking about food extends their vocabulary and allows them to express themselves. The story of food is told through "Ebby – The Little Greedy Dragon" who can't fly because he eats too many sweets.

The scheme of learning is for 10 sessions, for 30 minutes and twice a week. Teachers start by asking children what they know about food / why / what do we eat. Step 2 is story and flashcards of new words. Step 3 Guided by teachers, children retell the story assisted by flashcards. Step 4 the children learn about semantic field of vegetables – size, colour, new words. Step 5 Using pictures from magazines, children create pictures of themselves using vegetables. This is then linked to artist Archimboldo and the children see examples of his paintings. Step 6 is to organise food into the food pyramid, introducing the children to food types and vitamins. Consequently, more words are introduced. The children are asked to identify their favourite healthy food. Children begin to analyse the food they eat every day into healthy / unhealthy through the food pyramid. Children are introduced to food from across Sicily, the local specialities and Mediterranean diet is explained. We watched a video of children experiencing the project and saw examples of their art work. Using same method of assessment seen previously, the class could be seen to make progress in developing their vocabulary.

**The Season Memory Game** (Refer to **PowerPoint 5 The Season Memory Game** for further details).

CM introduced us to The Season Memory Game for Children aged 4 and 5. The objectives are to recognise characteristics of the seasons, stimulate language and extend the lexicon.

This scheme of learning runs across the whole year following the season wheel to identify which season it is. Step 1 is to observe the weather and introduce new language (rain, fog, leaves). Step 2 using the season wheel is to build the appropriate picture to reflect the seasons. Fuzzy felt is used as a sensory way of making links, identifying similarities and differences. Step 3 the children play memory games. Step 4 the children see images / videos of weather phenomenon especially things outside their own experience eg snow blizzard. They able to develop their vocabulary beyond their own environment.



The psychological framework for this is linked to Piaget, where children only understand their own reality. The cycle of seasons helps the children to conceptualise - “This winter is similar to all winters.” New knowledge is linked to their own experience and resonates with Kolb’s Learning Cycle.

We watched a video of the steps in the Seasons Memory Game. Children were seen talking about what they had learnt but still working on developing their language. This provides an opportunity for teachers to work on the group rules – turn-taking, helping each other, building relationships with peers. The teacher asks the questions, rather than giving the answers in a secure environment.

The impact can be seen where vocabulary extends knowledge with words rarely used. Less able pupils are seen to make progress across this scheme of learning, which may be as it runs for the full academic year.

**Question – any other projects that run across the full year?** The school’s art programme covers the full year and children experience this nearly every day. Other year-long projects are designed to develop other competencies. Everyday, for different schemes of learning, one child invited to lead by explaining what is going on. This gives all the children a further opportunity to develop their language.

### **Plenary**

Videos about Sicily and Palermo provided more context to the visit and a desire to extend the project so that all partners could host a visit. Consequently, partners agreed to seek 9 month extension, with the potential of real visit to Spain in September 2021, with visits to Latvia and a further (short) visit to Sicily in 2022. Paul Harrison (PNH) will draft the request for Tranmere Park to submit. PNH will complete the text for Mobility+ Tool. We will have brief catch-up meeting in April / May 2021 to agree the next steps for the project.

**Responses and reflections collated after the visit -**

CHALLENGES	STRATEGIES	EXPECTED IMPACT
Using the different topics addressed in the study visit, please, identify any related challenges faced by your school / group of schools	What strategies can you adopt in order to tackle the challenges described in the first column?	What is the expected impact of a proposed strategy and how will it be measured?
UK - School closures / bubble closures due to COVID.	Offering support/teaching/resources online as much as possible to ensure children have some teaching at home.	This will be a short-term strategy and the impact of the school closures will be measured when the children return to school.
UK - Reliance on parents to home school.	Providing quality resources with ongoing support, for parents to use at home.	The impact will be assessed on the children's return to school and interventions / teaching adapted to support the gaps.
ES - Adapt the " <i>sensory box</i> " activity to our five year-old children.	Talk to the P5 teachers and telling them about this activity. Think about the reason why it's valuable for them to do this activity with their children and see if they are doing a similar one.	To get more vocabulary: adjectives to describe objects and adjectives to describe their feelings while doing this activity. The impact would be measured by means of rubrics.
LV - Acquisition of new words	The word tree	We expect pupils to expand vocabulary in different word groups and will be able to use

		<p>them</p> <p>Showing the child the same pictures as at the beginning and notice if child uses acquired vocabulary</p>
LV - Formation of the sentence	The memory game	<p>Are able to implement new acquired vocabulary in the sentence</p> <p>At the end of the set of activities pupils will be shown the same season pictures as at the beginning to see if pupils use separate words or sentences to describe them</p>
IT - Language acquisition by bilingual (Sicilian-Italian) kids	<p>Using experience in order to foster the acquisition of linguistic skills</p> <p>Using storytelling to foster the elaboration of thought and feelings in narration</p>	<p>Kids use new vocabulary in different contexts</p> <p>Evaluation: Observation of the use of new vocabulary in storytelling and new context</p>
IT - A deep sense of local belonging and lack of sense of identity as Italian citizens	Using new vocabulary and the linguistic skills in standard language in order to empower the communicative competence in a broader sense.	<p>Kids get to use Italian naturally and feel the Italian language as part of their being.</p> <p>Evaluation: use of new vocabulary in different contexts and new relationship building process.</p>
IT - Empower the sense of permanence	Applying the “learning cycle” theory by Kolb in order to foster the ability of abstraction.	<p>Kids get to observe and understand the environment.</p> <p>Evaluation: Observation of the use of specific and uncommon lexicon in the description of phenomena not directly experienced.</p>
IT - Dismantle unhealthy eating habits	Working with real food in order to reflect on the role of the different nutrients in the developing of healthy habits using the everyday routine to set	<p>Kids get to distinguish healthy and unhealthy food</p> <p>Kids, guided by the teacher, set the “healthy</p>

	good and healthy eating habits	menu” of the day. Evaluation of food related learning : monitoring their choices regarding food
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