



## INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

### EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: ITALY (1 OF 2)

#### 1. Abstract

The pre-primary school of Forte Antenne in Rome is located in the pinewood of Villa Ada Park. Most of the children that attend the school belong to upper-middle class families, but there are also culturally diverse children coming from poorer socio-economic backgrounds.

In the school there are three sections that include 3-year-olds. All children attend the school from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. There are two children, aged 3 and 5, with autistic spectrum disorders.

The teachers follow the Montessori style of teaching, the idea being that children should be 'free to act' to allow holistic growth. Consequently children may move around the classroom, looking for toys or structured materials in order to engage in various school activities. In this way, according to the Montessori method, children are able to find the things that correspond to their educational needs. They develop their natural, innate thought processes and become aware of their emotions.

By playing with and handling different materials, children develop concepts through a concrete process which leads them toward the use of abstract thought. This method of discovering their environment and understanding concepts starting from direct contact with objects and nature can facilitate the development of cognitive abilities even in children with special educational needs or at risk or with disabilities.

Teachers in the school consider their programmes as opportunities to improve the lives of children and influence social equality. Through occasional and systematic observation, a teacher can test the quality and suitability of a child's development and of the teacher's didactic work.

School activities are organised by teachers according to each child's level of cognitive and socio-emotional-affective development. In the classroom space children can find, play and work with structured Montessori materials or with common materials such as coloured pencils and paper, as well as beans, chickpeas, walnuts and natural elements found in the pinewood. Objects that the children bring to school with them are added to these materials. Contact with different kinds of materials is important because it allows children to use their senses and intelligence and develop relationships with peers and adults.

The teacher in the school acts as a guide, a 'stage director', co-authoring the activities with the children who are the main protagonists in their growth process.



The educational curriculum is planned according to the Italian national curriculum guidelines 'Indicazioni nazionali per il curriculum' and some Montessori principles.

School goals follow the national guidelines in order to form identities and develop autonomy and competencies. All the children, including those who are vulnerable, should be guided during the process of growth to form their identity, become as autonomous as possible and develop cross-curricular competencies.

Teaching objectives are inspired by those described in the national guidelines, but are modified according to the educational needs of each child in the class.

The following are the objectives set by the teaching staff in this school, listed according to the 'areas of experience' divisions within the national objectives:

### ***Practical activities and socialisation***

- Area of experience: the self and the other. The child develops a personal identity, becomes aware of personal experiences and feelings and expresses them according to their ability.
- Area of experience: body and movement. The child likes moving, taking care of both body (personal hygiene) and environment. The child's gestures are controlled, potential errors made while moving around are considered and the child interacts with other children in movement games.

These daily practical activities help each child learn self-respect, respect for classmates and others and respect for the child's environment. Through these activities children achieve autonomy and independence, including children with specific disabilities relating to movement or concentration.

### ***Sensory education***

- Area of experience: body and movement. The child's gestures are controlled, the child likes movement, uses different postures in individual and group games and learns to use small instruments both inside the classroom and outside in the open air.
- Area of experience: knowledge of the world. The child groups objects and materials according to different criteria, recognising the features of objects, making comparisons and considering the quality of *objects*.

### ***Language and mathematics***

- Area of experience: speech and words. The child starts to explore, experience and recognise written language.
- Area of experience: knowledge of the world. The child has initial experience



of counting, measuring length, weight and quantities. The child plays with rough, coloured letters and numbers, made *from* special sandpaper, in order to stimulate sensory perceptions and make the correct hand and arm movements to form the letter or number.

### ***Cultural materials (starting Geography and Botany)***

- Area of experience: knowledge of the world (objects and living things). The child observes his or her own body, living beings and their habitats and natural phenomena, becoming aware of their changes over time. These activities facilitate the development of relationships with the environment and the development of the mind.

The teachers, under the leadership of the school head teacher, also plan and implement inclusive educational projects in different areas. These include a welcome area for new children starting school, an area for integration through movement, where children with and without special educational needs learn through movement according to the principles of psychomotricity, and an expressive-linguistic area, which includes theatre and opera music. Children are taught to appreciate sounds and different kinds of music including opera. Reading also takes place in the expressive-linguistic area, with children participating in special activities including a mobile library which is organised in the school at certain times of the school year. There is also an area dedicated to art, where children learn to understand and appreciate artistic pictures or sculptures. For Christmas, children, teachers and parents organise a little market which is open to local residents to help the under-privileged. This initiative is part of the project for solidarity and locality. At the end of the year there is an activity that aims to remind the children of their experiences together throughout the year and a final party, with the participation of parents, to consolidate the relationships created between children and adults.

## **2. Inclusive features**

The curriculum described above is accessible to all children, including those with disabilities or special educational needs. Each daily activity is proposed according to the children's abilities and the teacher's requests for participation are presented to each child according to their level of learning. Children complete each activity together. Contact with children who are already able to do the activity helps those who are still learning to do it correctly and to acquire the same level of expertise as the others.

The curriculum covers all aspects of a child's personality, keeping in mind not only the cognitive dimension, but also the emotional-affective, physical, social-relational,



aesthetic, ethical and spiritual dimensions. The activities chosen by the staff relate to a holistic vision of child development.

Teachers work in groups to carry out different projects accessible to all the children, including those with diverse and additional needs as described below. Class teachers and specialist teachers work with children as a team. They observe children with disabilities or with diverse and additional needs in three different contexts: while the child is working alone, in a small group and with the whole class. They prepare an educational plan to individualise and personalise the learning process and collaborate with health specialists, parents and local social support representatives to prepare a 'life project' that helps the child to develop as a person.

### **3. Inclusive highlight**

The inclusive highlight of this provision is represented by the co-operation between children, even though they are relatively young. Every activity is presented by the teacher to all the children and each child can decide how to complete that activity. The teacher is always present as a director to indicate what to do, but the child can work with others, asking them for help if needed. If the child has additional needs, a more experienced classmate can also help. The children work in groups or pairs and are taught to encourage each other during their work, they share materials and learn to appreciate one another's work.

### **4. Other evidence of quality IECE**

The provision described works positively with the university in Rome and receives teacher training students. The school also collaborates in certain university research projects on the application of metacognition in education in order to prevent learning disabilities in early childhood education.

As it uses Montessori materials for learning, the school is also recognised by the Italian Montessori Association, which sends future specialist Montessori teaching students to the school.

The use of materials and each child's individual freedom to act produce a higher level of both cognitive and social development, as seen in the observations made by teachers during their evaluation schedules.

The teaching staff possess a high level of pedagogical and didactical training and teachers like to work together in planning the syllabus and in evaluation. Teachers organise the education activities for the entire school and collaborate with different local associations for sport, music, art and theatre to involve all the children, especially those with diverse and additional needs, in these activities to improve



their holistic development.

Teachers collaborate with families, the local health centre, the local municipality and the school head teacher to write a personalised education plan for children with diverse needs and an individual teaching plan which favours children with disabilities.

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