

ECNAIS (European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools)

Modern soft skills in value based school programmes

The independent schools' response to the challenge of improving the social and economic future of young people

Annual Conference, April 2017 – Thursday 20th to Saturday 22nd

Rome, Italy

April 20th 2017 - Afternoon session

Short Schools' presentation about soft-skills in education in 6 countries

Istituto Romano Bruni – Padua, Italy

www.istitutobruni.com paolamigliavacca@istitutobruni.com

Our school is in Padua, in the North of Italy. It was founded more than 20 years ago and has currently four levels: kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school. Our students' ages vary from 2 to 18 years old. The project was conceived by families who wanted to have a school that relied on the educational vision of Fr. Luigi Giussani, a charismatic figure well known in the Italian Catholic environment. The school pedagogy was later refined according to the teaching of Prof. Romano Bruni from the University of Padua. The school has also inherited the legacy of a religious order of nuns and their educational activity that was started in the late Nineteenth century.

In our school to talk about soft skills does not mean to design projects aimed at developing these skills, but rather to discover which are the main elements of our pedagogy in order to enhance our educational method and make it more efficient.

This is why instead of describing a technique or an educational project I will share four stories that can show a few elements that are required to understand and develop the soft skills. These events occurred at the high school but we could have told other significant examples belonging to all the school levels.

I hope my speech will be useful to all regardless of origin country, the educational system and the teaching programme.

What does develop the soft skills? Passion and the discovery of a meaning

Example: Marco usually does not speak during the lessons nor asks questions and is often distracted. For this reason his teachers cannot understand his personality and what he has in his mind.

However, one day a teacher chose and read a text that he loves thinking about Marco's situation. Marco got interested in it and paid attention to it because the text reminded him of his own story. He even asked a question unexpectedly and at the end of the lesson he asked the teacher for the title of the book the text comes from.

Marco proves to be able to take initiatives and shows something we have seen before: he has soft skills.

Comment: What is able to activate non cognitive abilities? Something that is not cognitive. We can say that what does not belong to the cognitive ambit belongs to the affective one. To simplify it we could say that cognitive abilities are related to our mind and non cognitive ones to our heart.

Thus it is very important to understand what moves our heart, what moves all the human abilities of a student.

As in the example I have just made, we perceive that our teachings have to be able to touch the deep needs of our students in order to help develop the soft skills. Only in this way can the content communicated by the teacher become meaningful for the student, and so it can be studied also from the cognitive point of view.

It is then required that the teacher perceives the content he or she is going to communicate as meaningful and corresponding to his or her deep needs. One should take this into account while preparing the lesson for a class or a student.

Consequently a school which wants to improve the students' soft skills has to look for or train teachers who are passionate for the subject they teach, for their lives and for the meaning of reality.

A comprehensive gaze is required In order to look at a person as a whole

Example: during a teachers' meeting on for the term evaluation many teachers complained about one class. The students were not actively involved during the lessons, they were not hardworking, often did not do their homework and were quite disengaged. The Maths and Physics teacher took the floor and reported that during his lessons the students actually showed an interest and they were willing to learn, they asked for clarifications and were receptive to the content.

All the other teachers got interested and asked their colleague to tell them how he structured his lessons and how he presented the content. He explained that he did not give a lecture but gave the students some problems to solve so they felt challenged and wanted to understand more. According to him these students needed challenges that were up to their expectations in order to learn. The headmaster agreed with this hypothesis and suggested that all the teachers should change and adapt their lessons to what they had just heard from their colleague.

The aim was to provoke again the students to work. The teachers accepted this new idea and in the next few months they saw their students change their attitude also towards the other subjects.

Comment: non cognitive skills describe the character of a person and his/her human abilities in a wider way. This creates an issue as each person behaves differently according to different circumstances and also according to his/her natural inclinations. Moreover each person develops his or her skills at his or her own pace. When it comes to school students can behave differently based on the subject, the teaching programme and the teacher. One only teacher on his/her own, even if a genius, is not able to take into consideration the complex personality of a teenager.

This is why it is very important to have a team of teachers who periodically monitor their students. Only a team of teachers is able to notice the activation and development of the soft skills in the students. These skills are shown and activated in different ways and situations so the teachers who belong to one of these teams have to meet frequently. A proper exchange of information is required within each team and each teacher should feel free to share his/her experience, listen to the others' and make a verification of what moves the students and what gets them stuck. In this way each teacher can modify his/her approach, when required. A team work is the only way to look at the capabilities of each student in a more comprehensive way. Each

teacher will indeed look at them not only through his or her own eyes, but also through their colleagues'.

The proposition of the object to know and the method of knowledge

Example: Maria is in grade 4 of a state-run high school when she decides to go to a different school as she does not feel she gets on well with her classmates and teachers. She looks for a different environment and people who could help her become passionate again for what she has to study. Her family has an interview with the headmaster of our high school and after taking a few admission tests Maria moves to our school. One month later when her parents meet the headmaster again they tell him that for their daughter coming to our school has been like entering a new world because she does not have to learn the topics by heart, but she has to learn how to reason, she does not have to memorize but understand the content of the lessons. Maria has noticed that teachers and students have a dialogue on topics and has seen the experiments carried out in both Chemistry and Physics labs. These opportunities are important because through them one can make an experience of the contents they have to learn that can be memorized more easily. Maria is surprised by the fact that students are asked their opinion on the topics by the teachers and is discovering what critical attitude and real knowledge mean.

Comment: The main aim of school is definitely teaching and communicating concepts, imparting knowledge (and wisdom) but the learning process does not happen just through memory. It is then through the soft skills that the concepts can be learned. Saint Gregory of Nyssa said: "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything". In the word "wonder" we can read a non cognitive involvement between the subject who wants to learn and the object of knowledge. When we teach we have to take into consideration some deeper factors that indeed let the knowledge process happen. These factors, which are identified as soft skills, can be put into play through some pedagogical methods. Among these, I would like to mention the "lesson as a dialogue or seminary" and the topics as problems to solve.

The "lesson as a dialogue or seminary" is a lesson that is divided into four parts: firstly the teacher presents a topic as a problem and asks the students some questions. Then the teacher summarizes all the comments from the students and they write down the so-called "discoveries made during the lesson"; in the end the students study the topic in depth and prepare further questions to make during the next lesson.

To propose topics as problems means to put the students in front of a piece of reality that may arise their curiosity and desire to understand. The teacher proposes the students to observe a natural or a physical phenomenon, an ancient text, an image, a geometric figure and lets the impact of these things on them to enhance the knowledge process. In fact it is only if the students recognize the need to understand something that they will become able to start the path to knowledge. In this way the students are compelled to participate, ask questions, express their opinions, work in teams, make experiments in the labs, "get their hands dirty" when dealing with issues and texts without getting the solutions by the teachers beforehand. All these experiences set their personalities and non cognitive competencies in motion.

Let's add one comment: the choice of the content made by the teacher is important because the method of knowledge is determined by the object to know. Since the etymology of the word "method" means "road" and a road leads always to a destination it is essential for the teacher to know where is the destination. The method then depends on the choice of the destination and thus on the choice of the object. We think that the more interesting and important the object is the easier the acquisition of the method to know it is. In conclusion the choice of the topics that teachers want to teach is then essential.

Freedom is precious. An ethical way of using and evaluating soft skills.

Example: after attending our school for three years Andrea wants to leave. His father explains the headmaster the reasons behind his son's choice: "He cannot stand anymore to be constantly put under observation during the lessons. He is annoyed and does not want to be engaged by the teachers so often and constantly motivated by them. He wants only to be evaluated according to the test results and does not want to show his commitment to the subjects daily."

Comment: the soft skills help to observe one person's character in a comprehensive way, but this approach touches also the students' most intimate self and sensitivity. When it comes to education and pedagogy there is always one element that could hinder a comprehensive relationship between the teacher and the student: one person's freedom. The student is free and thus can decide whether to accept or refuse the proposition made by the teacher. The more comprehensive this proposition is the more crucial freedom becomes. It is then important to take this human characteristic into consideration in an educational path with respect and consideration.

It is also relevant to take into account a second element: time. Each student grows up and develops his or her capabilities at his or her own pace. When we refer to the non cognitive abilities it is necessary to consider the unique timing required for the development of each individual. Based on the above we can briefly mention a last consideration on the possibility of designing evaluation schemes and tests that can help evaluating each student's soft skills. We think that it is not right (and probably not even possible) to evaluate them on their own. In fact they refer to a unique and intimate side of each person that is unmeasurable. It is useful to take them into account in our pedagogy and our methodological approach to a topic, in the selection of the content of a lesson and the educational programme of a school but the evaluation of each student's feedback is subjective and difficult to record objectively.