



MY IDEAL SCHOOL CHILDREN AS POLICY MAKERS

PILOT ACTION ACTIVITY HANDBOOK

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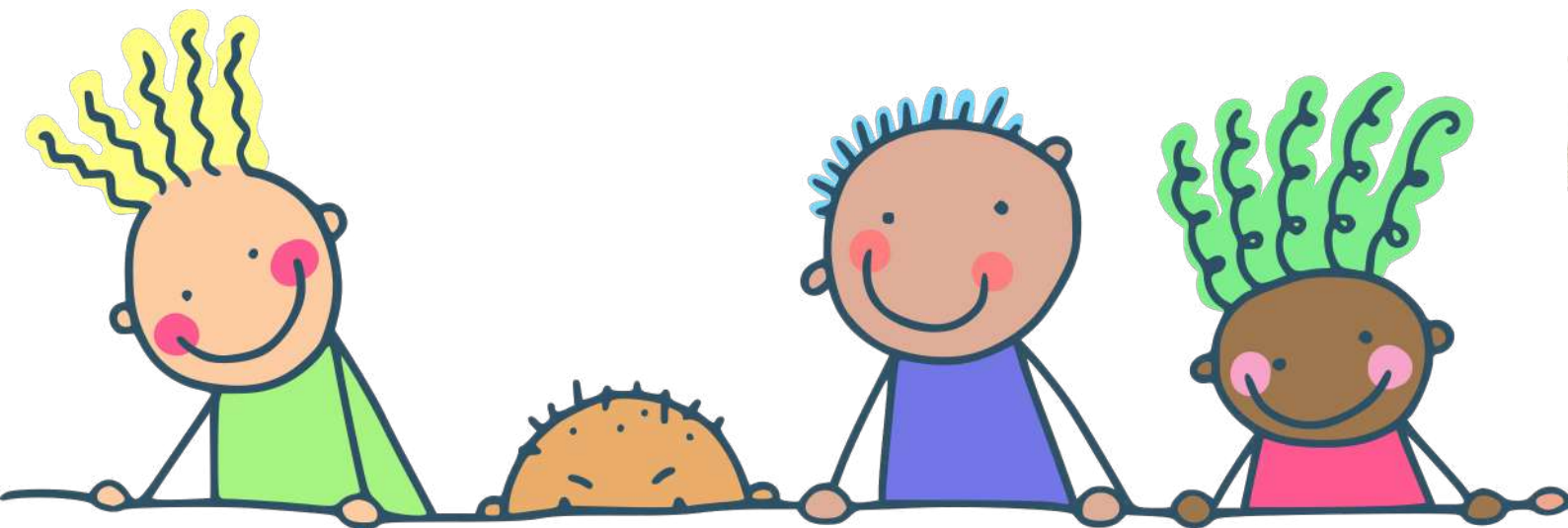
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Acknowledgments

The activities in this handbook were co-created, and involved thus researchers, teachers, children and their families in all steps of the process. We would like to thank children for their enthusiasm and creativity and children's parents for their generosity. We would also like to thank the headmaster of the schools, Anna Starnini, who accepted to take part in the project. Especially, we would like to thank the teachers that embarked in this adventure: the activities would have not been possible without their dedication and their great work. The real authors of this handbook are thus primarily Elisabetta Ghirelli, Luciana Romeo, Federica Rossi, Emma Lombardi, Sara Alessandro, Margherita Flamini, Elena Cavassi, Annalisa Maroni, Sara Quadrelli, Maria Pia Azzaro, Rosanna Piccirilli, Morena Mancini, Maria Assunta Olivieri, Alfia Stissi, Lucia Valerio, Vincenza Chirichella, Sabina Michelacci and Filomena Vigilia.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The NEW ABC project in a nutshell	4
What is co-creation?	4
How does this handbook work?	5
How should I use this handbook?	5
LET'S GET STARTED!	6
Getting familiar with the context	6
Aims and objectives	6
HOW TO...	7
Involve colleagues	7
Start the process	7
Deal with bureaucratic challenges	8
CHAPTERS: ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING AIMS	9
CHAPTER 1. THE BOOK CLUB	10
CHAPTER 2. KAMISHIBAI ON INCLUSION	13
CHAPTER 3. RENOVATING A ROOM	15
CHAPTER 4. CREATING A DIGITAL BOOK	19
CHAPTER 5. PUPPET THEATER	21
CHAPTER 6. POETRY	23
CHAPTER 7. A SCHOOL TO EAT	25
EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION	27
Developing your own evaluation strategy	27
Developing your own dissemination strategy	28



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INTRODUCTION

The NEW ABC project in a nutshell

NEW ABC is a project funded by Horizon 2020 that draws together 13 partners from nine European countries with the aim of developing and implementing nine pilot actions. All NEW ABC pilot actions include children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, but also teachers, families, communities and other stakeholders in education, as co-creators of innovation to empower them and make their voice heard.

If you want to learn more about NEW ABC this is the link to the project website where you can find information on the other pilot actions too:




newabc.eu

What is co-creation?

The activities in this handbook revolved around the school that children dream of, i.e. around their 'ideal school'. All these activities were co-created together with children. Therefore, before we introduce them, we would like to explain in just a few words the basic features of co-creation.

Co-creation is a method used to develop democratic partnerships between researchers and local/community stakeholders by promoting their involvement in the design of practices that are tailored to a specific context and responsive to the needs of the community and the participants they serve.

Co-creation is particularly apt in increasing engagement and participation on behalf citizens in policy-making because it:

-  places end-user value at its core,
-  gives particular relevance to the implementation of co-created practices
-  includes broader dissemination strategies as part of the design from inception

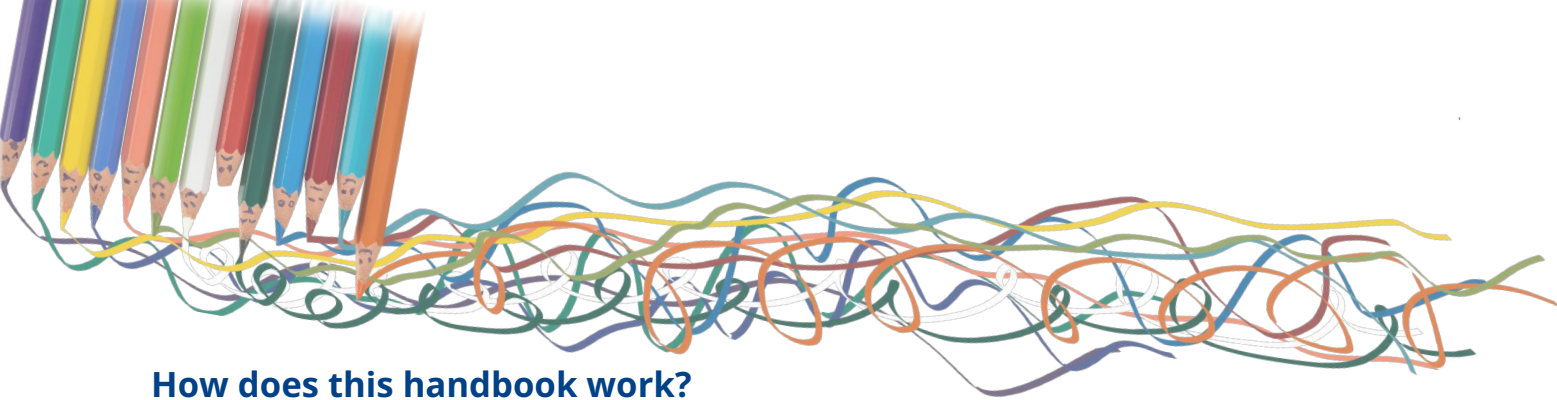
All the activities presented in this handbook have been planned and implemented together with pupils and parents, headmasters, and researchers by taking the children's perspective and allowing them to voice their dreams and needs.



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How does this handbook work?

The *My Ideal School* handbook is a reader-friendly guide that teachers, educational professionals, but also parents and pupils can use to plan and implement activities based on co-creation. The handbook follows a step-by-step overview of all co-creative activities that will allow you to replicate and evaluate them with your pupils. It also provides a brief description of the co-creation approach and of some of the challenges that you are likely to encounter (bureaucracy is likely to be one of them!).

The handbook presents eight co-created activities that were implemented in Italian pre-schools and primary schools. Each chapter section provides a description of the initial phases of the process and of the main objectives of the activity. You will also find a rough timescale and a list of all required materials. Finally, the handbook outlines possible ways to evaluate the impact of the activities you carried out and to disseminate your activities to other schools and associations.

How should I use this handbook?

It is entirely up to you. Each pilot action experience is differently and uniquely shaped by the geographical and social context within which it takes place. The handbook is designed in such a way to offer a detailed but not prescriptive overview of the process behind the *My Ideal School* activities and to invite you to create your own unique, local version. How much time you decide to spend on each activity will be determined by your team and co-researchers. Equally, you might also decide to develop your own activities to better respond to the needs and interests of your stakeholders – just take what you need for your everyday work. Nevertheless, the activities should be based on two fundamental pillars: they should be co-created and they should foster people’s social inclusion in education.



LET'S GET STARTED!

Getting familiar with the context

If you are not familiar with the context, the first thing to do is to get some information about your school/organization. These might include how many students and teachers attend the school, the composition of the student body (e.g., how many native and non-native students), previous projects and activities, possible funding and so on.

This general 'reconnaissance' of your school will help you calibrate your initial approach and tailor it according to the specific situation of the context. A knowledge of the needs, challenges, and strengths of your school will enable you to develop activities that are closer to the 'real' situation of the context you work in.

For example, the activities in this handbook were co-created in a primary school that caters for a culturally, linguistically and socio-economic diverse community. Thus, teachers developed activities that were focused on the social inclusion of children and families as well as on the linguistic, cultural, and emotional barriers that children might face in our societies.

Aims and objectives

The main aim of these activities should be to give voice to the real needs of children (and families) in education and to increase the visibility of how inclusion can be co-created with the ideas of teachers, children and their relatives. The ideas of the participants directly involved in education, although often neglected, are central to improving our educational system. We should therefore showcase them through various strategies, which can be roughly divided into two main 'levels':

- 👤 First, the voice of children, parents, and teachers should have an impact at the 'micro' level of classroom activities. They should be able to express their perspective and make a difference in how everyday activities in educational institutions unfold.
- 👤 Second, stakeholders' perspective should be given visibility by creating synergies and connections with policymakers at the local, regional and national levels. In this case, the aim is to bring children's and parents' ideas to the fore, forcing policy makers to take into account their perspectives.

(Also these broad aims and objectives can be partly recalibrated according to the characteristics of your specific context.)



HOW TO...

Involve colleagues

A problem that you might face regards the number of people in your school who are willing to participate. All the activities can be carried out by a single class, however if other colleagues (educational professionals) are involved they could contribute by providing support and exchanging ideas and strategies to co-develop the activities.

To overcome some likely objections you might:

- o Point out that these activities are not necessarily alternative to the institutional curriculum, but might be integrated to it, e.g. to any already planned activity aimed at working with your pupils on topic such as inclusion, kindness, empathy, etc.
- o Underline the previous success of these activities: children actively participated and enjoyed the activities, and this resulted in creating a serene and constructive classroom atmosphere.
- o Explain that most of the activities described in this handbook can be carried out in just a few hours. You do not necessarily need to devote many classroom hours to this project (see for instance Chapter 1 or Chapter 4).

Start the process

Ok, so you managed to find some colleagues who seem willing to participate. How can you start the process of co-creation?

There are many possible ways to 'ignite' the process. Initially, you will need to broadly introduce the topic of the activity and give some indications on what you expect from children. Then you might start eliciting children's ideas and see where they lead you. Eliciting children's ideas might be complex and you surely have some ideas of how to do it. A possible way is to propose a general brainstorming on the topic you have chosen. For example, several activities in this handbook started with the following questions:

Which is your ideal school? What would you like to do at school? What do you need/miss?

A brainstorming could develop in different ways. You could moderate a whole-class discussion or let students discuss in small groups. Alternative to the oral mode is writing: you could also prompt children to write their ideas on small pieces of paper (individually or in small groups). These notes can be then attached to the blackboard in order to visualize the different ideas.



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On the basis of the ideas emerged in this initial brainstorming, you will then start developing a specific activity and calibrate it according to your context.

Deal with bureaucratic challenges

You can't wait to start brainstorming the activities with your pupils and get going. However, there is some red tape you need to take care of, which might include:

- obtaining permission from the school principal and, if the case be, from the school governing bodies;
- checking that there are no constraints regarding participation;
- making sure that the ethical procedures are all in place and thus:
 - o If necessary, ensure to get a signed consent form from children's parents (according to your school practice and procedures they may have already signed this form at the beginning of the school year) as well as other participants.
 - o If you want to truly co-create with your pupils, ask them to 'sign' an assent form;
 - o You could also write a note in simple language that accompanies the consent form to explain the aims of the activity.



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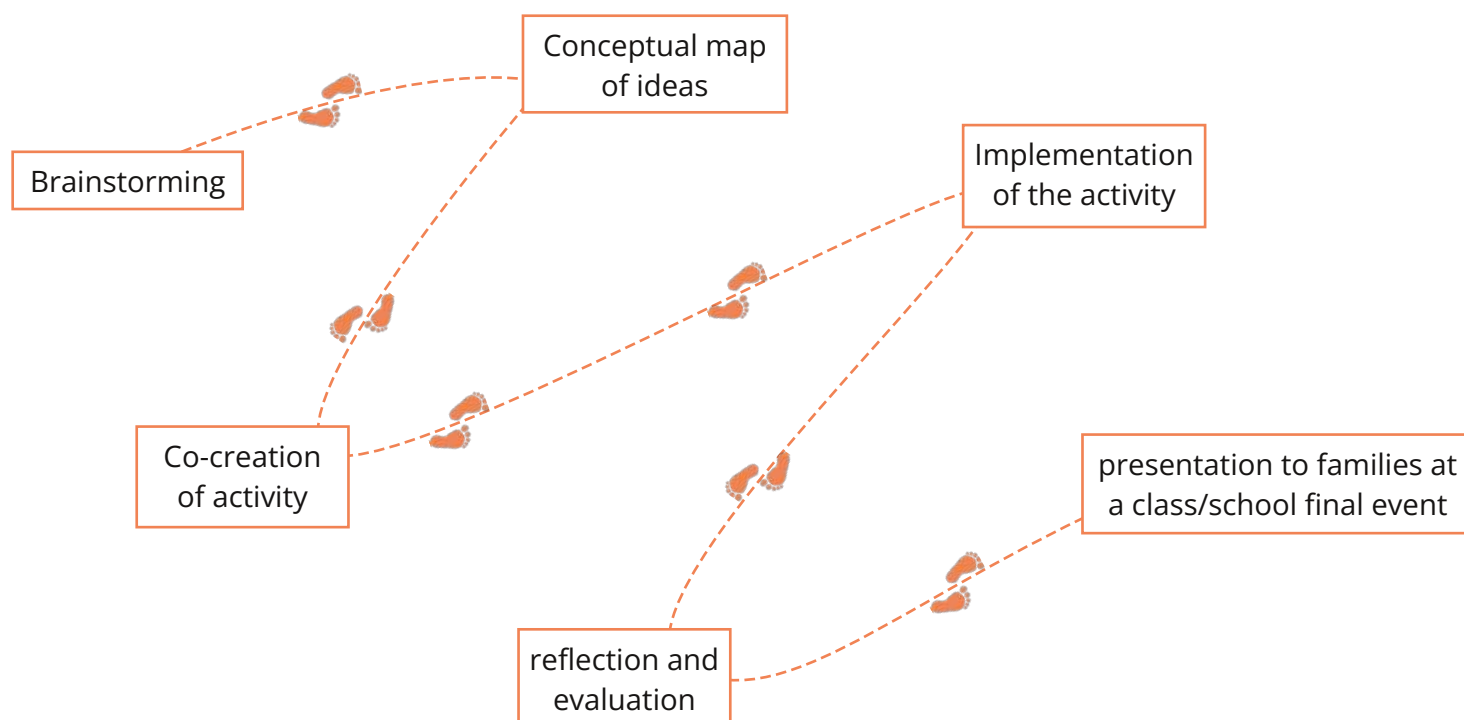
CHAPTERS: ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING AIMS

In what follows, eight different activities are briefly sketched. Each chapter starts with a brief description of the context, the learning aims, the materials you will need, and the estimated time to carry out the activity. These activities are simply examples of how a co-created activity might unfold. You can get some inspiration, but don't be afraid of changing the activities according to your specific context! For example, in each chapter we wrote how many children and teachers participated in the activity, but you can make your activities as large or small as you like.

At [this link](#) you can find posters and videos that showcase the activities

At the end of each activity there is a further link to videos and/or materials that you may find useful.

In the classroom, all the activities followed these steps:



CHAPTER 1. THE BOOK CLUB

Context	Primary school, 1st grade (6 year olds) Participants: 19 children, 2 teachers, children's parents, the headmaster
Materials	Books on specific topics and the materials for each reading session (e.g. a jar, pieces of paper, soil, seeds...)
Estimated time	12 hours in the classroom + teacher's preparation of the activities at home

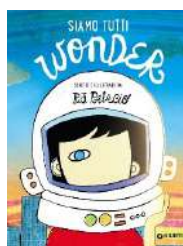
By the end of this Chapter children will have...

- 👑 Practiced active listening (in Italian and English)
- 👑 Developed cognitive tools and linguistic resources to talk about and understand emotions
- 👑 Improved their ability to collaborate on a shared task
- 👑 Had a good time

At the beginning of the school year, the teachers were looking for an idea to talk with children (who had just started attending the primary school) about some central topics regarding living in a community (e.g., kindness, equality...). They thus planned six reading sessions on a specific topic, which were followed by a lab in class. Here are the books and the corresponding topics:



Topic: **equality**
Book:
Moi devant
by Tallec & Brun-Cosme



Topic: **kindness**
Book:
Wonder
by R.J. Palacio



Topic: **care**
Book:
Avrò cura di te
by Giraldo & Bertelle



Topic: **identity**
Book:
Chi vorresti essere?
by A. Papini



Topic: **happiness**
Book:
The big little thing
by B. Alemagna



Topic: **friendship**
Book:
On sudden hill
by Sarah & Davies





All topics of the activities summarized for a final event at school



An outdoor reading, in English with an Italian translation

The books were read by a parent of the children, who came to school and read in front of the classroom (outdoors in the school garden and indoors in the classroom, when the weather was not good).



A post-it and the 'jar of happiness'

As an example, one of the readings was centered on the concept of happiness. The mother of a pupil read the book in the garden. After the reading, children and teachers discussed about the story and its message. After this whole-class discussion, the teachers introduced an activity: they distributed a piece of paper (the size of a post-it) to all participants (adults included), asking them to write down and draw a thing or situation that makes them happy. For example, children wrote "videogames" and drew a joystick. Afterwards, children stood one by one in front of the class and read their word. Then, they folded the

piece of paper and put it into a jar (see pictures above). This jar remains in the classroom as a reminder of all good things that make us happy; children can hold it during the lesson if they feel a bit sad.



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SOME REFLECTIONS

This could be a good activity for younger children, who often need words to talk and understand their own emotions. The activities after the reading of the books could be multifarious – it would be better if they involved some hands-on activity: making bracelets (with beads or pasta), planting seeds, doing origami and painting them... the only limit is your imagination!



The books could be read in various languages; in this case, a teacher could read the translation after the original version.

For the post-reading activity you can use recycled materials

[LINK to the activity](#)



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CHAPTER 2. KAMISHIBAI ON INCLUSION

Context	Primary school, 3rd grade. Participants: 2 teachers, 20 pupils and their parents, members of the municipality
Materials	Paper, colors, a wooden portable 'theater' (Kamishibai)
Estimated time	30 hours + teacher's preparation of the activities at home

By the end of this Chapter children will have...

-  Developed tools to understand diversity
-  Learned to collaborate with peers on a shared project
-  Become more aware of their own body and voice
-  Had a good time

The activity was based on the planning and performance of a theater play based on the Japanese 'paper theater' (Kamishibai). At first, the teachers involved an expert from the university, who in three workshops to the classroom explained the basics of Kamishibai and to show some theater plays (you do not need to necessarily involve an expert; you can find information on Kamishibai on various books, websites, and video-platforms such as Youtube).

Children enjoyed these representations very much. After that, the expert helped the teachers in the planning of a theater play which would be co-constructed with the students. Specifically, teachers and students created a story about a child who start attending the school in a foreign country, without knowing anybody. Each child drew one of the images that constitute the 'story' of the theater play and wrote the text to accompany them. The images and the text were negotiated with the teachers. At the end of the process, the play was performed in the school yard in front of the researchers, the parents, and members of the municipality. Each child showed his/her image and read aloud his/her texts. Children also deployed various objects to integrate the play with sounds and displayed materials.





One of the first representations and the final play, performed in the school yard.

SOME REFLECTIONS

This activity is very engaging for the role that each child takes within the process. Every child in the classroom has a central role in the play and contributes to the performance. This activity can be used to trigger relationships of solidarity and mutual help among children (as it is generally the case with shared medium- or long-term projects).

The activity is also powerful in relation to children's emotional needs and to their construction of a meaningful identity. Specifically, by centering the play on children's well-being at school, teachers managed to let children think about their own experience, reflecting for example on the value of their group relationships in the new school context.



If you do not have a great knowledge of Kamishibai, you could involve some experts or work in teams with colleagues (and the Web is plenty of information and useful tips on Kamishibai!)

[LINK to the video](#)



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CHAPTER 3. RENOVATING A ROOM

Context	Primary school, 4rd grade. Participants: 3/4 teachers, 24 pupils and their parents, members of the municipality
Materials	Renovation materials, paint, paintbrushes, paper
Estimated time	25 hours in the classroom + renovation work

By the end of this Chapter children will have...

- Started to understand their own role in the community
- Learned to negotiate and discuss various ideas
- Learned to deal with opinions that differ from their own
- Learned the value of working for the community
- Had a good time

At the beginning of the school year, teachers and students started thinking about their ideal school, advancing several ideas that could be implemented in their current school. Among these ideas, the fact of having more space for everyday activities was mentioned by several students: one of the biggest challenges that they experienced at school was the lack of space. On the basis of this first 'brainstorming', teachers and students began to look for possible solutions. In the basement of the school there were for instance several rooms that were abandoned or deployed as storage room. The children and teachers explored this space and found a room that could be transformed into an available space for everyday activities. The teachers involved the headmaster, who gave her consent to start with the renovation. Then the teachers and the children wrote a letter to members of the municipality (i.e. the Mayor and the Councilperson for Education) who granted permission to start the renovation work and provided all necessary bureaucratic permits and some logistic support.

Having cleared these formal steps, the implementation of the planned activities soon began. Teachers and students involved several parents in the renovation of the room. First of all, teachers and parents from the Parents Association freed the room of all the materials that



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had been stored in the room throughout the years. Parents were also involved in the subsequent steps of the activity: for instance, the father of a student was a carpenter and helped restore the broken windows, whereas another one who owns a construction firm volunteered to renovate the floor of the room, to re-plaster, whitewash and repaint and to remove dangerous furniture (such as an old washbasin).



Parents' working at the renovation of the room

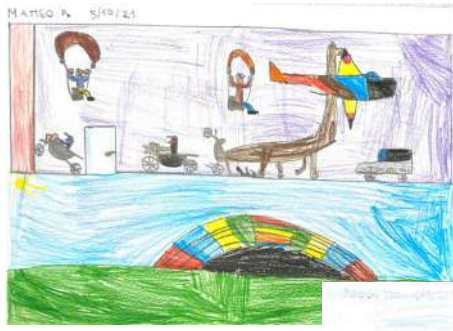
Once the room was ready, the teachers and children started thinking about images that could be painted on the walls. Specifically, teachers organized a 'contest' based on children's drawings. All children produced a drawing representing their dreams and wishes for their ideal school to be displayed on the walls. These drawings were then collected, discussed and voted in the classroom. The 'winning' drawings were then incorporated into the final paintings on the walls. Notably, teachers and students painted the room together. The room is also equipped with eco-leather pillows which were donated to the school by a local entrepreneur.



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Children enjoying the new room and its pillows

Eventually, the room was officially inaugurated by the headmaster and the councilperson for education of the municipality of Forlì. The room is now part of the school heritage and will be used as a creative laboratory, as a reading space, and much more. The final results as well as the process of renovation are being disseminated through various channels by teachers and researchers.

[Watch video](#)

SOME REFLECTIONS

In order to develop an activity like this, you will need help. So, try to involve other people (such as children's relatives) in the project. You might find out that people are extremely helpful and resourceful. The renovation of a room is just an example: you could also paint the school façade or build a facility to help people with disabilities access the school.

This activity was particularly impactful on all the co-creators and gained a life of its own. The school decided to also paint parts of the exterior by using the same colors and by adding a meaningful sentence.



Children's involvement in a 'material' project is important. We all enjoy being able to see the tangible results of our work.

[LINK to the activity](#)



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CHAPTER 4. CREATING A DIGITAL BOOK



Context	Primary school, 2nd grade. Participants: 3 teachers, 20 pupils
Materials	Tablets/computers, software Book Creator
Estimated time	20 hours

By the end of this Chapter children will have...

-  Enhanced their digital skills
-  Constructed narratives on their own identity
-  Put to use their creativity
-  Had a good time

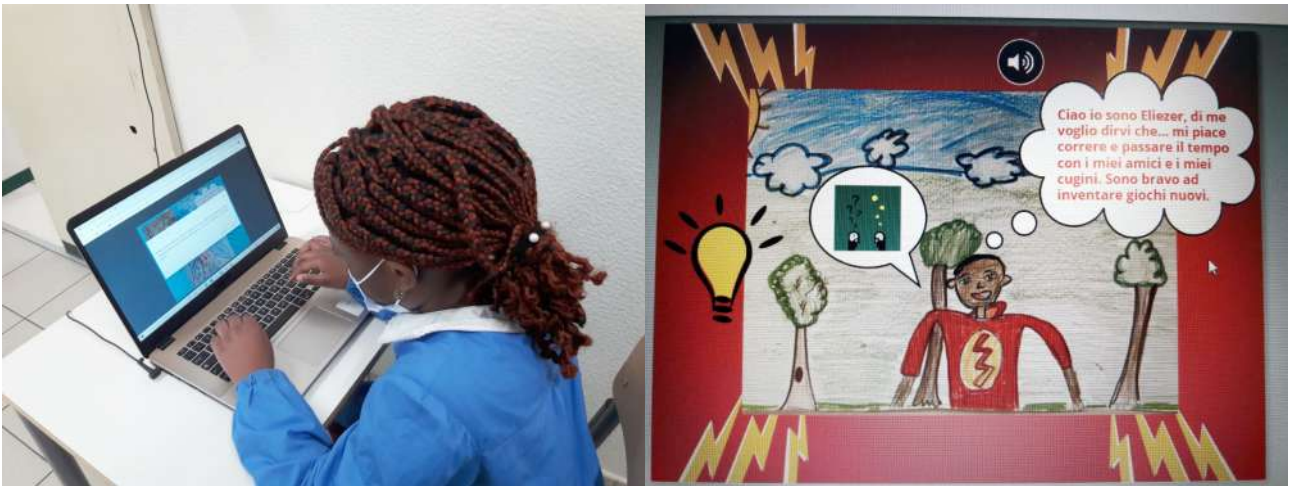
To initiate this activity, teachers started by reflecting on the 'ideal' school together with the children. On the basis of this brainstorming, they co-constructed a digital book where all the proposals and ideas are displayed. In this case, children had only experienced a school with masks and social distancing, because of the pandemic. Thus, they said their ideal school is the one that their older brothers and sisters have told them about. They wanted a school without masks, without social distancing, and with the possibility to do group work and play together both outside and in the classroom.

On the basis of these ideas, children and teachers started collecting their ideas in a digital book. This digital book was created with a specific software (Book Creator) and consists of children's drawings, recorded voices, and pictures. The book was presented to children's parents and to members of the municipality during the final event at the end of the school year.



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A child working on her project and a screenshot of the digital book that children created

SOME REFLECTIONS

For this activity you'll need tablets or computers so that each child can work on their own project (or in small groups). For this task, it is more difficult to involve children's parents (but maybe they can also contribute to the digital book, working at it at home)

Digital artefacts are an effective way of promoting children's engagement. Moreover, they do not require particular materials, apart from a computer. Children can also share them through various channels. You can see an example of our children's digital book if you click on the link below.



Children are often better than us at using technology – so let them lead the activity!

[LINK to the book](#)



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CHAPTER 5. PUPPET THEATER

Context	Primary school, 5th grade. Participants: 2 teachers, 23 pupils and their parents, members of the municipality
Materials	Videos, projector, musical instruments, recycled materials to construct the theater and the figures
Estimated time	50 hours + teacher's preparation of the activities at home

By the end of this Chapter children will have...

- 👑 Enhanced their sensorimotor skills by constructing figures
- 👑 Learned to collaborate on a shared project
- 👑 Improved their musical competences
- 👑 Practiced their creativity
- 👑 Had a good time

This activity consists in organizing a puppet-theater play. In this specific school, teachers and children organized a puppet-theater play based on Annalena Tonelli, the woman the school is named after. Ms. Tonelli spent a good part of her life in Africa, promoting educational opportunities for the local children. At the beginning of the process, teachers started talking to the students about Tonelli's work, and then discussed about the connection between her life and the schools in Italy. On the basis of this reflections, children started thinking about the positive and negative aspects of Italian schools, outlining their personal representation of the ideal school.

After this first brainstorming phase, teachers and pupils started planning the play. They first constructed the puppets with various materials. Teachers' acquaintances and children's parents helped by providing various materials, such as a wooden theater which was later painted by teachers and children. While doing this, teachers and pupils also wrote the script and prepared three different songs, to be sung in choir during the play (as a sort of intermezzo).



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Toward the end of the school year, teachers and pupils performed the play using the various puppets that they prepared. Each child moved and voiced a puppet. All children were also involved in the singing of the three songs. The play was videorecorded by the research team. Notably, we had two cameras and we let children videorecord with one of them. There is thus an 'official' video and the video that was recorded by children themselves.



The wooden theater and the puppets

SOME REFLECTIONS

Organizing a puppet-theater play requires time but it gives a certain freedom regarding topics and scenes organization. You can add songs, poems and whatever you see fit. Children are usually very keen on participating and giving their contribution. The final performance possibly helps them to learn skills to deal with stress. Moreover, whether you build it out of wood or cardboard it can be reused with other classes and for other activities and projects.



You can use recycled materials to construct the puppets!

[LINK to the video](#)



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CHAPTER 6. POETRY

Context	Primary school, 5th grade. Participants: 2 teachers, 22 pupils
Materials	Paper, posters, computers and video-sofwareas
Estimated time	20 hours

By the end of this Chapter children will have...

- 👑 Enhanced their linguistic skills
- 👑 Enhanced their metalinguistic awareness
- 👑 Practiced creative writing
- 👑 Expressed their musical interests
- 👑 Had a good time

Within this activity, teachers and children created a book and a video about their ideal school. At the beginning of the process, teachers started collecting students' ideas about their ideal school. In this phase of brainstorming, several ideas came up – such as outdoor education and school trips to various cities. These ideas were first collected in several strips made of three spaces:

- o First space: the school as it is
- o Second space: the change to be implemented
- o Third space: the school as it should be

These strips were collected in a book and integrated into various posters that the students prepared in small groups. After these activities, children and teachers also prepared a video with images and music that they chose. The video also comprises children's voices and names and will be disseminated through various channels.



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Children working at some posters during the activity.

SOME REFLECTIONS

In this activity, children have space to develop their ideas and explore their creativity (for example, children enjoyed choosing the music for the final video). The initial brainstorming can lead to the creation of various medial products (poems, posters, videos, drawings...).



Children have often very clear ideas regarding how the videos should look like – let them express their aesthetic ideas (even if you don't like them)!

[LINK to the video](#)



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CHAPTER 7. A SCHOOL TO EAT

Context	Pre-school, children aged 3 to 6. Participants: 4 teachers, 54 pupils and their parents, members of the municipality
Materials	Food (cookies, chocolate...) and various materials
Estimated time	-

By the end of this Chapter children will have...

- 👤 Learned to collaborate on a task
- 👤 Improved their creative skills
- 👤 Developed senso-motor and linguistic skills
- 👤 Eaten a lot of sweets
- 👤 Had a good time

This activity can be implemented in a pre-school setting with children aged 3 to 6. At the beginning of the process, teachers and children talked about their ideal school. During this initial brainstorming, a child said that her ideal school is a school that can be eaten by children (as the house in Grimm's fable of Hansel and Gretel). Teachers and children co-constructed thus a model of the school made of bread, cookies and chocolate cream. This school did not last long, as it was soon eaten by the children. After that, children and teachers constructed a model of the school with puppets representing them. Using this model of the school and the puppets, children and teachers also produced a video with voice over that tells the story of the school. Teachers also organized a final event to showcase the activities, which was attended by the headmaster, children's parents and members of the municipality.



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The diorama of the school with all children



The model of the school made of sweets

SOME REFLECTIONS

Activities that involve constructing something tangible together and eating together are usually very effective in pre-schools; they can be used as vehicles to socialize children to the value of diversity and to the value of their relationships at schools (with teachers and peers). Through these kinds of activities, children also develop various cognitive and senso-motor skills



Involve children from different age groups in this activity!

[LINK to the video](#)



Networking the
Educational World:
Across Boundaries for
Community-building



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EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION

Developing your own evaluation strategy

At the end of the activities, you might wonder if they were successful or not. You will surely have a hint of how it went, but how can you assess more clearly the impact of your activity?

We list here some indicators that can be useful to evaluate your activity. You can develop an evaluation tool using some (or all) of them.

Children's participation

Were children eager to talk and participate? Were they displaying enthusiasm and willingness to be part of the activity? Did you notice an increased participation in terms of children's contributions to the discussion?

Networking in the school

Did you manage to involve a group of teachers in the project? How are your work relationships after the activity?

Parents' involvement

Did you manage to involve parents in some steps of the activities? Were parents asking you about some specific things that children told them at home? Were they curious about the activities that you were implementing?

Policy makers' involvement

Did you manage to inform local authorities about the activities that you implemented? How was their reaction? Are they willing to take part in the activity, in some way?

Professional development

Have you developed new skills during the activity? Do you think you improved your professional competences? Have you learned something?

Overall impact

Are there many people interested in your activities? Did you manage to disseminate them through various channels? Are your colleagues asking you about the activity? Are some colleagues from other schools willing to re-do your activity?



NEW ABC has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004640.

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Developing your own dissemination strategy

You will surely be eager to let people know about the great activities that you managed to co-create with your students. How can you do it?

There are several strategies that you can deploy to enhance the visibility of your activity. We divided them into two macro-areas:

LOCAL LEVEL

At the local level, you can start disseminating the activity while you are implementing it. For instance, after every 'session' you can give students something tangible to bring home (e.g., a piece of paper with a sentence that summarizes the activity, or a small origami, a drawing and so on). You can also involve other people by illustrating the activity through posters and informal chats with children's parents, colleagues, and the headmaster). You can also organize (together with your team) final events that allow to showcase what you have done – invite local authorities and policy makers to these events!

(INTER)NATIONAL LEVEL

You can use various digital channels to present your activities to a broader audience. For example, a platform at the European level is **eTwinning**; here, you can upload a description of your activity and share it with other teachers from different Europe countries.

As you know, there are also other multi-purpose platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and so on (but be careful with privacy issues!)

So, that's pretty much it. Thank you very much for your attention!

We hope this handbook has been (and will be) useful for your professional practice. Best of luck!



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