NOME COGNOME CLASSE

Inspiring workshops in a multicultural context

MY EXCHANGE PROGRAMME
IN MELBOURNE

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Referente: Prof……

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Introduction

My motivation and expectations

Since I was a child, thanks to my parents' input, I have always loved travelling, visiting new places and meeting people from different cultures. Therefore, when I found out I had been selected among the twenty students to take part in the cultural exchange program with a high school in Australia, it was for me a great joy, even because the project involved the study and experimentation of scientific subjects, which have always been my favourite ones.

The first time I had heard about this project I had thought it would have been amazing to experience it, but it seemed to me somehow unrealizable. However, when I found out that the other students willing to participate did not have grades better than mines, I started believing I could make it. Then as soon as the news came I was in the group, you can guess how I felt! Other students were a little worried, especially for the great distance; instead the prevailing feeling for me was excitement. It was not just going to be a wonderful journey far away, but a full immersion in the life and habits of young people belonging to another continent.

Starting point

First of all I would like to explain the link of this project with my school curriculum. I attend the International Scientific Italian-English Section of Liceo …….., a bilingual program that prepares students for seven Cambridge IGCSE Exams (Geography, French, Maths, Physics, Biology, English as a Second Language, Art and Design), as well as for the Italian high school diploma. Our curriculum involves stages abroad (Great Britain and France), during which we study some of the scientific subjects mentioned above, but it also offers the possibility of taking part in school exchanges. Since 2013 my school has carried on a project with the Strathmore Secondary College and the Victorian Space Science Centre (VSSEC) in Melbourne; every year this project allows 20 Italian students and 20 Australian students to enjoy mutual hospitality.

Off we went!

On Saturday 1st October 2016 our group (20 students from the fourth-year IGCSE classes and 2 teachers) left Bologna by coach and set out for Milan to catch our Thai Airways flights to

Bangkok first, and then to Melbourne. Our excitement was sky-high! Our adventure was starting!

The Project

Scientific workshops

The part of the programme that sparked my interests the most were the scientific lessons and experiments at the Victorian Space Science Education Centre (VSSEC). The VSSEC is a specialist maths and science centre created by the Victorian State Government that uses the context of space to engage teachers and students in the teaching and learning of science. Although it is an independent centre, the structure is situated in the grounds of Strathmore Secondary College, therefore it was really close to our host families' houses and extremely easy to reach once we were accompanied to school by our host siblings or parents.
At this centre we carried out three main projects: VCE Chemistry, Human Bioscience and, last but not least, Mission to Mars.

VCE Chemistry was the simulation of an analytical investigation, including both chemical and instrumental analysis, of a top secret incident aboard the International Space Station. We were taught by an expert team how to calibrate and use some really sophisticated instruments, such as the Atomic Absorption Spectrometer, the UV-Visible Spectrometer and the Gas-Liquid Chromatograph. Then we were divided into three groups, each carrying out a different experiment: one group had to determine the quantity of ethanol in various alcoholic beverages, another group had to determine the concentration of calcium and magnesium in a range of water samples, while the last group had to determine the concentration of iron in different vitamin pills. Obviously, as soon as all the groups had finished, we switched positions so that everyone could try everything.

Human Bioscience was the simulation of all the investigations carried out on people willing to become astronauts, that is a hands-on program to test an astronaut's fitness, carried out using specialist equipment. Of course people going to space must have some precise and strict characteristics, including physical and psychological features and, of course, must be healthy and not prone to getting sick. In order to simulate all the measurements and investigations, we performed different tests both on our bodies (height and weight, heart rate, blood pressure, visual acuity…) and on externals products provided by the centre (blood and urine). Unfortunately it turned out that I have not got the features requested for being an astronaut… Also, we learned the reasons for radiation being dangerous in space by creating a cloud chamber and then we designed effective methods of blocking different types of radiation.

The last experience we did at VSSEC, and the one I found most interesting, was Mission to Mars. This consisted in a full-day, scenario-based program where students work as a team and use their problem-solving and analytical skills to complete a simulation of a geological survey of the Mars surface. We were divided into two groups: the Mission Control officers and the astronauts. The astronauts (each one with their own role such as engineer, geologist,...) wore specially-designed spacesuits and were sent into a large room, coloured by a red light in order to simulate Mars environment, where they could find and collect real soil and rock samples, drill an ice core, conduct a thermal survey and measure seismic activity. Meanwhile the control officers could follow their colleagues on the surface thanks to a camera and had to communicate with them via radio telling them what to do in order to collect data. They also monitored the environmental conditions and were responsible for the safety of the astronauts. In the afternoon we switched roles in order to experience both mission control and astronauts' tasks. It was another memorable hands-on experience.

After the three days at VSSEC we also went to the Swinburne University of Technology for the so called "Astro Tour". We took a virtual tour through the Solar System and beyond in Swinburne's Virtual Reality Theatre. We enjoyed some 3D astronomy movies (for instance the one about the lifecycle of a star) produced by the team of astronomers, artists and programmers belonging to the Centre for Astrophysics and Supercomputing.

Intercultural experience

Another key aspect of my exchange with Australia has obviously been the integration with a different culture: living two weeks with an Australian family (Alexander Grutteria, his father Tony, his mother Samantha) and with local teenagers inside and outside the school.

My previous experiences abroad had always been different: I had been to the United Kingdom several times, both for the school stages at St. Albans and for summer courses (Egham, Cardiff, Bristol, Nottingham,…), but I had always lived in a college (boarding school or university campus). My homestay experiences had only been in France: in Montpellier for a summer course and in Bordeaux for a school stage.

All the opportunities I have mentioned, even though different from each other, had been very interesting and rewarding, but the exchange with Melbourne has been something unique. Also the French families had been really welcoming towards me and I have wonderful memories of them, but by the Grutterias I have been 'adopted' as an actual son. Since the very first minute they have made me feel an essential part of the family. I have shared everything with them: Alex's and his father's passion for cars and football, Alex's mom's love for cooking,…

My Australian family is bicultural: Greek on the mother's side and Italian on the father's side (a multicultural reality also common to the other host families of the exchange group that were mixtures of English, Irish, Spanish, Egyptian and other cultures). However I do not think I was welcomed so warmly just because I am Italian: I reckon Australian people are really a multicultural and open-minded society, ready to accept and enjoy differences, eager to meet people from different countries. Living with a family has obviously allowed me to get to know the place and the habits of its people much better, in a more profound and genuine way.

By attending classes at Strathmore College I have also had the opportunity to compare the main features of the Italian and the Australian school systems. For instance, we have all been struck by the number of students per class (much smaller than ours), the classroom layout, the

class management and the respectful but friendly relationship between students and teachers (teachers, and even the principal, are called by their first name!).

The intercultural aspect of my exchange programme has also included a significant, even if short, approach with the Aboriginal culture. We went to the beautiful Royal Botanic Gardens of Melbourne where we enjoyed the so called "Aboriginal Heritage Walk". With our guide, a man with true Aboriginal origins, we experienced a traditional smoking ceremony and we discovered the traditional uses of plants for food, tools and medicine. We developed an understanding of, and respect for, the customs and heritage of the local Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung people.

Natural beauties

Last but not least, this cultural exchange program took place in an astonishing part of our planet: the "Land Down Under", also called the "Promised Land"! I had checked some online materials about Australia before leaving, but what I found there went beyond my expectations. We were extremely lucky as we had the opportunity to explore various areas around Melbourne: we had the chance to admire and get in contact with the unique fauna and flora that this country offers.

The excursion to Phillip Island allowed us to enjoy, among other things, the fascinating and moving event of the so called 'Penguin Parade'. Each night at sunset people can admire thousands of Little Penguins, the world's smallest penguins, returning ashore after a day's fishing. As the sun fades in the sky, these tiny animals walk up the beach to the safety of their homes in the sand dunes.

Even more striking was the trip along the Great Ocean Road up to the 'Twelve Apostles': a stunning collection of giant rock stacks, formed by erosion of the soft limestone and rising off the shore of the Port Campbell National Park, on the southern ocean coast. Unfortunately

there are now only eight Apostles left, the ninth having collapsed dramatically in July 2005, but it is an impressive sight all the same! During this day trip I was struck by the breath-taking open horizons, beaches that seemed untouched by humans, silence only interrupted by the howling of the wind… I had already visited some exotic or far away countries with my parents, but nature there seemed to me really amazing .

Another very interesting occasion was the visit to the Healesville Sanctuary, an area of 30 hectares of bushland where they fight wildlife extinction: they protect local and national endangered species and provide the best care to the animals they host, often in need of surgical treatments. There we had the long-awaited close-up encounter with koalas, kangaroos, echidnas, emus, peacocks, wombats, platypuses and the famous kookaburras!

Conclusion: my reflections

The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page (Saint Augustine)

A journey is best measured in friends rather than miles (Tim Cahill)

Travel and change of place impart new vigour to the mind (Seneca)

Undoubtedly, this exchange programme has meant a lot to me and has enriched me from many points of view. I will be forever grateful to my school and to both the Italian and Australian people in charge of the organization of this fantastic adventure. I would like to distinguish three different areas in which I have experienced a significant growth thanks to this project.

Intercultural competences

During the two weeks in Melbourne I spent a lot of time with Alexander's schoolmates and friends, a group of teenagers belonging to different ethnic groups and different social classes. Nowadays in Italy we are gradually getting used to meeting people from different countries in our daily life, but no doubt our Italian situation has nothing to do with the cosmopolitan and multicultural reality in Melbourne. This great variety involves different habits, different views and different lifestyles, which all coexist in a natural, simple and genuine atmosphere.

The majority of couples, for instance, are formed by partners from two different countries and cultures. The first example are my host parents: Samantha from Greece and Tony from Italy.

By living in Melbourne, even for a short period of time, it has become more and more natural for me to deal with linguistic and cultural differences. Moreover, not surprisingly, students in Strathmore belong to many different religions and in talking to them we found out they went to different places of worship but they all respected one another's cults.

As I wrote before, Australian society is interesting also for its open-mindedness. For example at Strathmore College we immediately noticed a poster that surprised us a lot as in Italy you would never find it in a school: "Some boys like boys and some girls like girls. Some like both". About the same topic, that is the natural acceptance of differences, in particular of different sexual preferences, initially we were struck when we found out that one of the host families was a family with two mothers. After a while, though, when our friend who was hosted there told us that she had got used to that uncommon situation, even for the rest of our group it became a normal situation. No doubt experiences like this have made me

more aware of and open to diversity, more respectful of the others and ready to reject prejudices.

In short, I can say that after this experience in Australia I have improved my ability to integrate in a different society and I have further moved towards a 'world citizenship' that can go beyond geographical, political and religious boundaries.

When the journalist from the local Italian newspaper interviewed me about this school exchange, I said "people here are so distant from Europe, yet I feel them so close! I feel at home!". This is the great gift that travelling offers us: learn more about mankind and life in general, acquire a wider vision and broaden our horizons.

Deeper relationship with Nature

The sceneries I admired around Melbourne, so wide and open, so wild and unspoilt, have had a significant impact on my soul. Everything there is so different from our densely populated and frantic Europe! If I had to summarise what I saw in a single sentence, I might say that many areas of that land seem untouched by human beings, there seems to be no anthropic evidence. We just had to move out of the city centre and we could admire the most fascinating and exotic plants and flowers.

When we were there, for example along the Great Ocean Road, we also had a different perception of time: everything flowed in a more calm, quiet and relaxing way.

Apart from beaches, cliffs, rocks, open fields, incredible flowers, plants and trees, the other striking presence in Australia is the one of the unique animals that I mentioned before. When we got in close contact with them, we felt a sort of primordial harmony with the animal kingdom, a sensation rather new for most of us.

Everything I have described in this part, has created inside me a new perception of Nature: I had always loved plants and animals since I was a child, but now I realise I have become much more sensitive towards ecological problems.

Insights for my future studies and work

During the three days at VSSEC and the extra day at Swinburne University, I was plunged in a unique learning environment in which I acquired a wider and deeper knowledge of some scientific topics related to chemistry, biology and physics, as I explained before. However, even more importantly, I exploited a hands-on approach, which is typical of the Anglo-Saxon academic system and not always available in our Italian schools. The experiential aspect of the workshops is no doubt the key feature at VSSEC together with teamwork, leadership and problem-solving activities. I have been struck by all their highly-

engaging learning strategies and by the technology-rich learning environment. Laboratories at VSSEC do inspire passion for sciences!

I don’t think such centres exist in Italy or probably we have some high-level scientific centres, but I suppose they are not open every day to students of all levels (even primary school kids!). Another inspiring aspect of my days at VSSEC and at Swinburne University was that workshops were led by young university researchers from all over the world, even China and Japan. I am sure some of them could be defined visionaries and trailblazers: we could feel that their minds were somehow special. Yet, at the same time, they were down-to-earth and had a lowly and friendly attitude towards us.

I reckon this exciting and challenging atmosphere has had an impact on my future plans. I already aimed at the scientific field for my university studies, but after this experience I am even more attracted to the world of sciences and to the idea of working in an international environment.

All this was possible in Australia, a country where you can still take advantage of many opportunities!