Elena Pirovano and Jackie Robertson

Literacy and language: The power of learning Italian

VATI CONFERENCE 2025

Outline

🖊 *What is literacy?*

🖊 *Literacy across languages*

🖊 *The super-power of Italian*

🖊 *But…how? Some practical examples*

What is literacy?

saper leggere e scrivere,
alfabetizzazione

In the Australian Curriculum literacy is considered "fundamental to a student's ability to learn at school and to engage productively in society"

"[...] students become literate as they develop the *knowledge, skills* and *dispositions* to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in the society"

Australian Curriculum

speaking

writing

reading

oral, print, visual, digital texts

listening to

creating

viewing
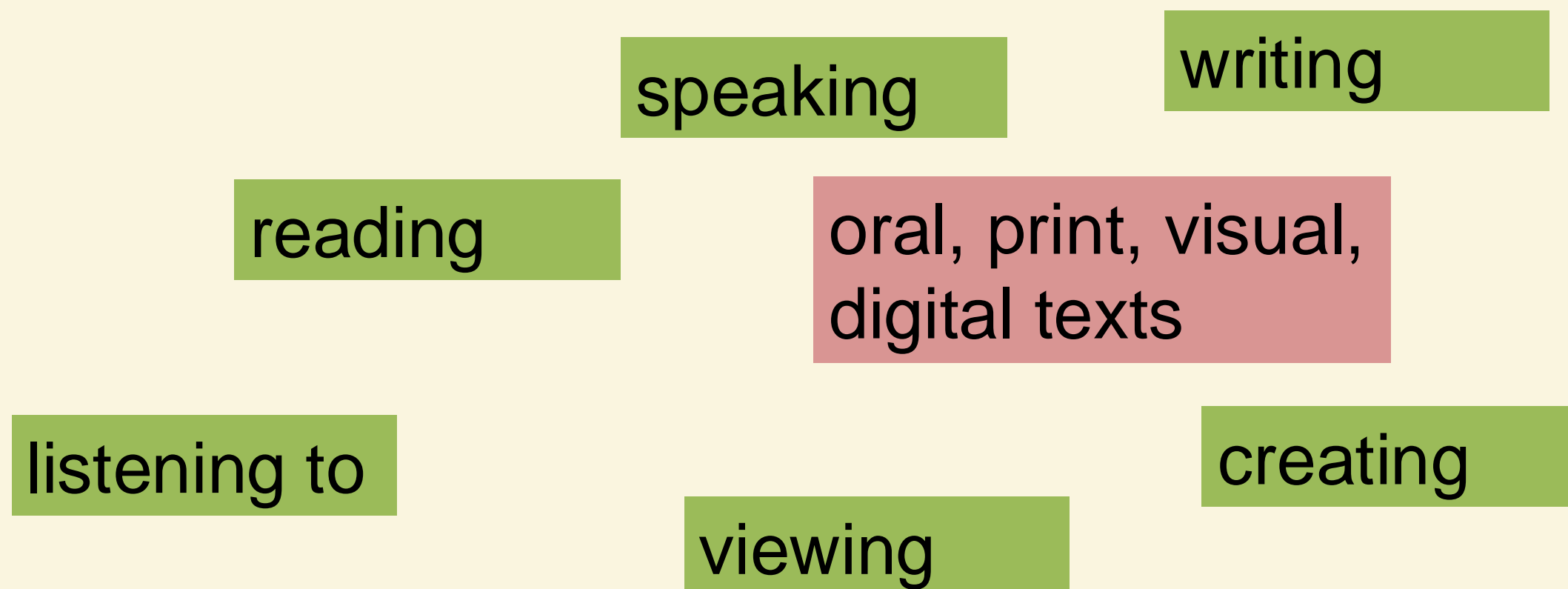
Literacy across languages

"Learning languages in addition to English extends students' literacy repertoires and their capacity to communicate. It strengthens students' understanding of the nature of language, culture, and the processes of communication."

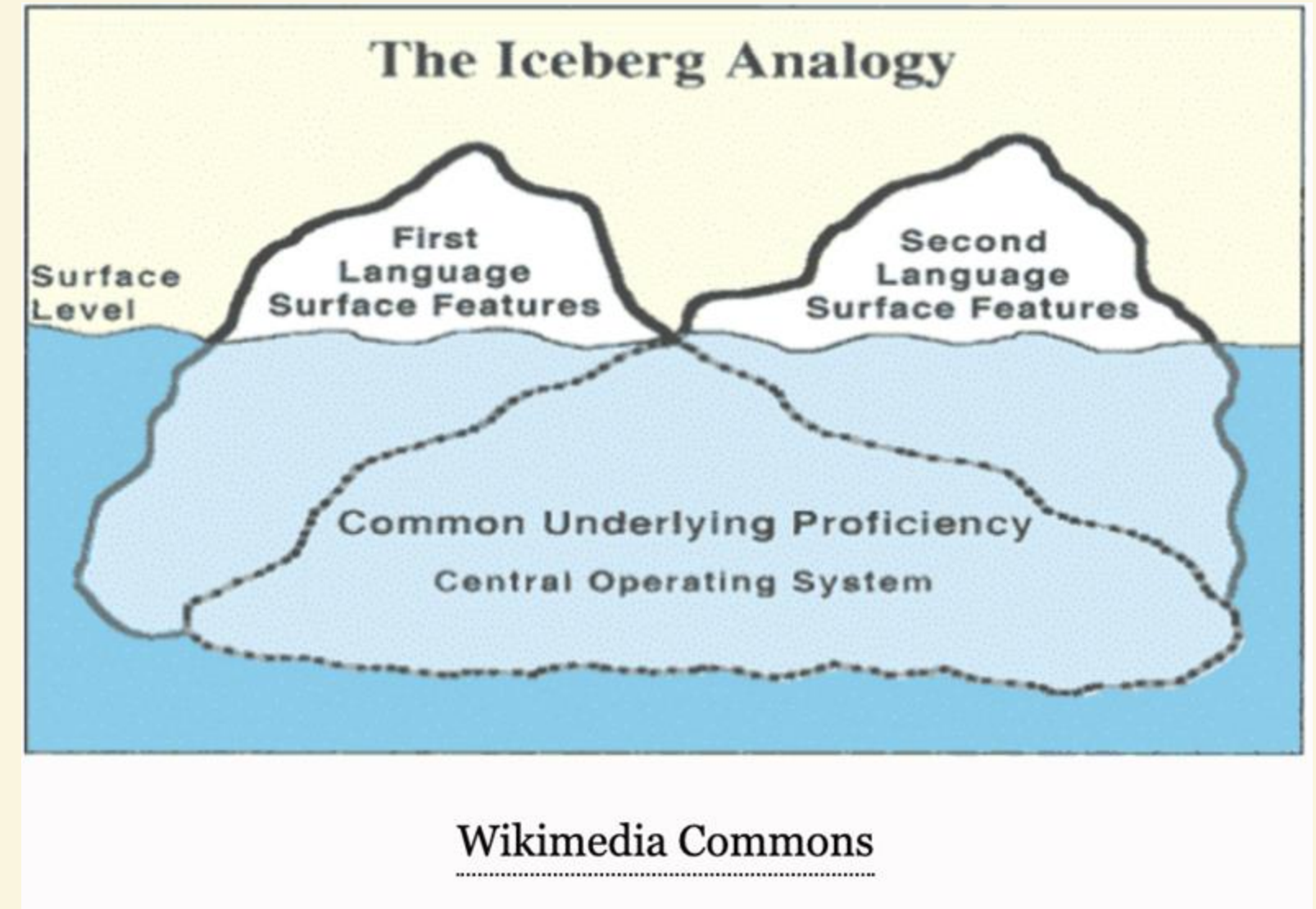Victorian Curriculum, Languages

English

home language(s)

Italian (TL)

other languages

Literacy develops across the linguistic repertoire of the students

languages in the 'brain'
of the multilingual speaker
are not separated
but interconnected

The Iceberg Analogy

Surface Level

First Language Surface Features

Second Language Surface Features

Common Underlying Proficiency
Central Operating System

Wikimedia Commons

threshold hypothesis (Cummins, 2001)
to benefit from transfer across languages,
the languages should reach a certain level of proficiency

Types of transfer

In summary, depending on the sociolinguistic situation, five types of transfer are possible:

- transfer of conceptual elements (e.g., understanding the concept of photosynthesis)
- transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g., strategies of visualizing, use of graphic organizers, mnemonic devices, vocabulary acquisition strategies)
- transfer of pragmatic aspects of language use (e.g., willingness to take risks in communication through L2, ability to use paralinguistic features such as gestures to aid communication)
- transfer of specific linguistic elements (knowledge of the meaning of *photo* in *photosynthesis*)
- transfer of phonological awareness--the knowledge that words are composed of distinct sounds

conceptual

learning strategies

language use, pragmatics

linguistic elements (e.g., cognates)

phonological

The super-power of Italian

From research: Five studies that have investigated the potential of learning Italian for literacy development (reading and writing) in English

limited instructional programs

- quicker phonological processing and single word reading
- higher proficiency in word reading and word awareness

exposure to Italian (no instructed teaching)

students exposed to Italian through family connections scored better than English monolingual students in all tasks related to reading in English

bilingual programs

correlation between Italian and English reading and writing

- reading emerges first in Italian
- writing is correlated in terms of content and text organisation but also linguistic features (vocab, grammar)

The super-power of Italian: what benefits?

This positive transfer could depend on the very consistent link sign/sound of the Italian language (transparent orthography and phonology)
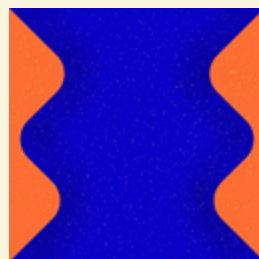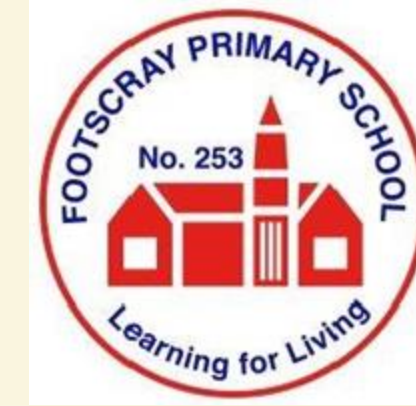
Connecting research and teaching practice for:
- planning your Italian program
- advocating for Italian classes to the leadership
- explaining the potential of learning Italian to mainstream classroom teachers

Some practical examples

Collaborative Literacy Planning:

English and Italian teachers plan together using the Victorian curriculum.
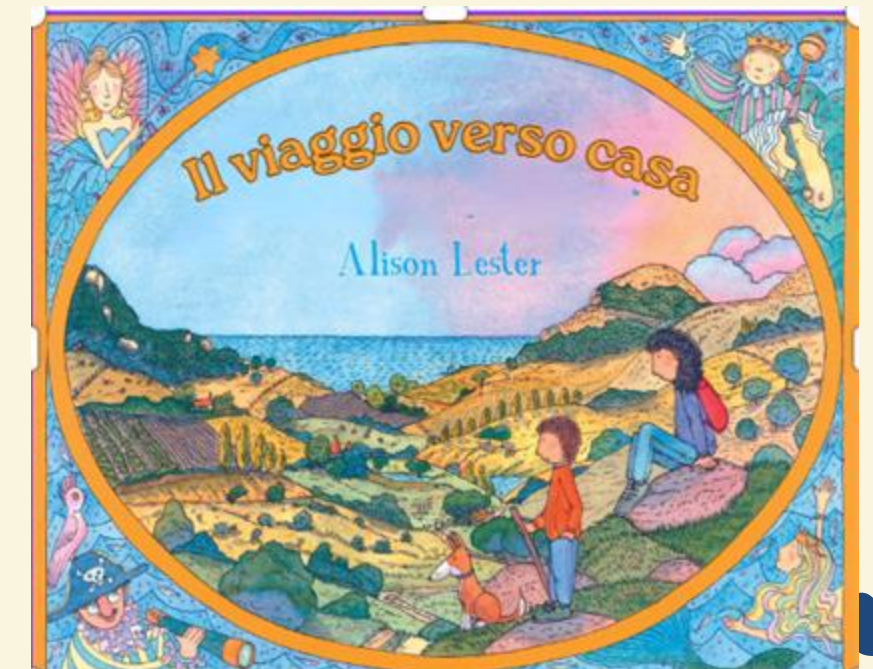
Co-develop units of work looking at what the students will be able to know, understand and do, in each language.
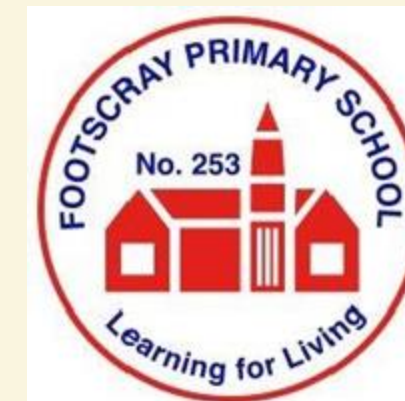
Examples

    Narratives: Plot and Setting (reading/writing),
    Writing to inform,
    Writing to describe,
    Making connections,
    Summarising

Lettura

Leggiamo insieme

Leggiamo insieme

Leggiamo Insieme: Reading Prompts

Chi?
Chi è questo personaggio?
Chi è il personaggio principale?

Come?
Com'è questo personaggio? (character traits)

Dove?
Dov'è.../ sono i personaggi? Dove vive [....]

Cosa?
Cosa fa ...? Cosa succede qui/nel testo?

Perché?

Qual è il problema?

Quali sono../è
- *parole chiave*
- *un dettaglio importante*
- *l'idea principale*
- *Il messaggio della storia*
- *Il tema ricorrente*
- *le idee e parole ripetute*
- *un fatto interessante*

Hai dei collegamenti con questo testo – dal testo a te, dal testo ad un altro testo, dal testo al mondo?

Ti piace questo libro? Perché? Chi è il tuo personaggio preferito?

- Mentor text

- As they listen and follow the text, the students are making meaning – and putting into practise comprehension skills such as: Inferring, using the picture and context clues, making connections

- After reading the text together we talk about the text: **parliamo del libro**

- Students working on skills such as: retelling, summarising, identifying the main idea, theme.

Leggiamo da soli
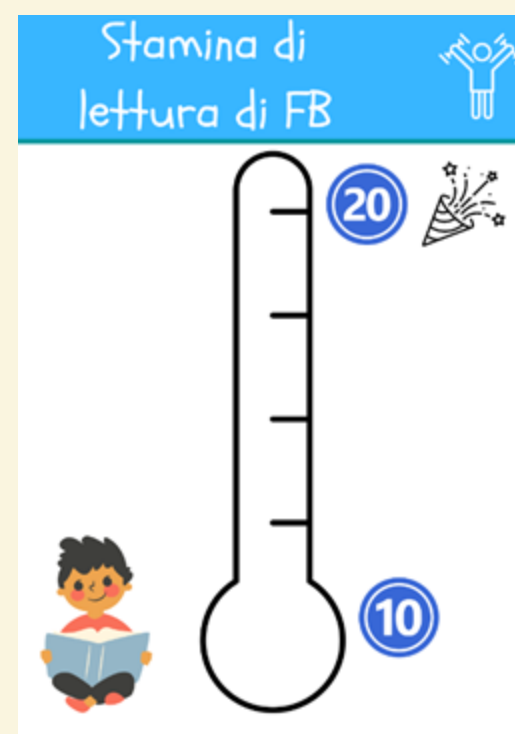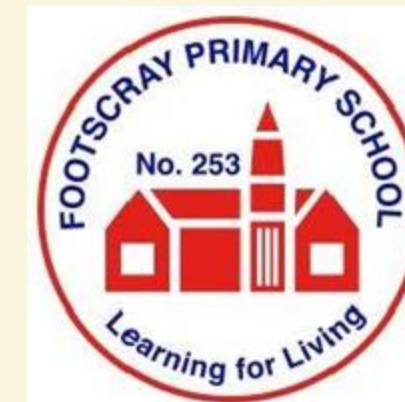
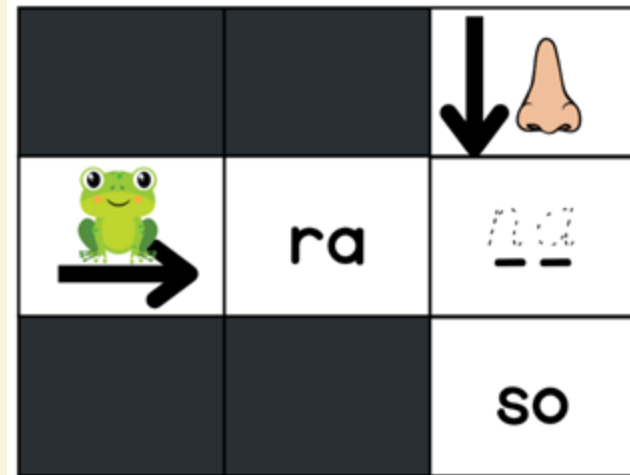Students read for a period of time working on developing their stamina di lettura.

Each classroom has a **classroom library** with picture books in Italian (fiction and non-fiction), chapter books…

The library also includes **levelled texts - students read their libro giusto** (at their independent reading level).

Teach reading using the **metodo sillabico**

Attività

Scaffold the link between code and meaning:

Word-picture, mini-storie, word work activities

Building oral language and comprehension:

Language experience, play based learning, mentor texts, inquiry resources

Small group guided reading

During guided reading, students read a book the teacher has specifically selected to provide a moderate amount of challenge.

The teacher supports them in tackling the necessary problem solving to overcome difficulties they may encounter.

The ultimate goal in guided reading is to help children learn how to use independent reading strategies successfully. (Fountas and Pinnell)

Small group guided reading

A way of supporting students to read and understand more difficult texts including - opportunity to:

- introduce new/unfamiliar language: vocab and sentence structures.

- teach new syllables

- explicitly identify and teach effective reading strategies

- monitor and give individual feedback

- provide students the opportunity to discuss and learn from each other.

Dividiamo la parola in sillabe o parti più piccole.

tulipano
tu / li / pa / no

In una parola grande cerchiamo una parola piccola.

velocemente
veloce

Usiamo le parole affini e parole simili

scuola → school
libro → library

È come un'altra parola in italiano?

amico → amicizia

Strategie per leggere e capire

Guardiamo le immagini
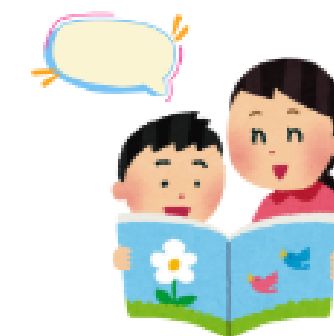
Usiamo i dizionari.

DIZIONARIO ITALIANO-INGLESE

Usiamo il contesto.

Leggiamo tutta la frase.

Indoviniamo... ha senso?

Leggiamo la parola ad alta voce
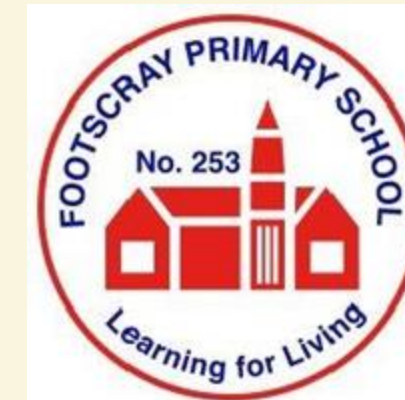
Scrittura

Writing about Reading

Link between reading and writing

Mentor texts

Exploring elements of the text/ analysing the author's craft - describing a character, describing a setting.
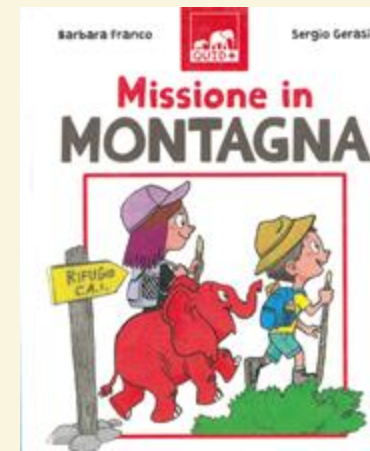
Summarising the text

Writing a modified version of the text

Writing about reading

Un riassunto breve

Il Titolo	
i personaggi	
l'ambiente	
il tema	
3 parole chiave	
un dettaglio importante	

Barbara Franco   Sergio Gerasi

Missione in MONTAGNA

RIFUGIO C.A.I.

Brandon Brown vuole un cane

by Carol Gaab

Italian Translation & Adaptation by Francesca Silvano

11-14 anni
livello A1

ITALIANO FACILE

SABRINA GALASSO

L'ISOLA MISTERIOSA

Illustrazioni di Desiano Simeone

ALMA
Edizioni
Firenze

LUNGO LA STRADA, MOKA VEDE UNA PIZZERIA.
MOKA PENSA: «VORREI FARE LA PIZZA!»

LA MUCCA MOKA FA LA PIZZA

Agostino Traini

La mia recensione del libro

Titolo: _____

Autore: _____

Chi?

I personaggi:_____

_____

Dove?

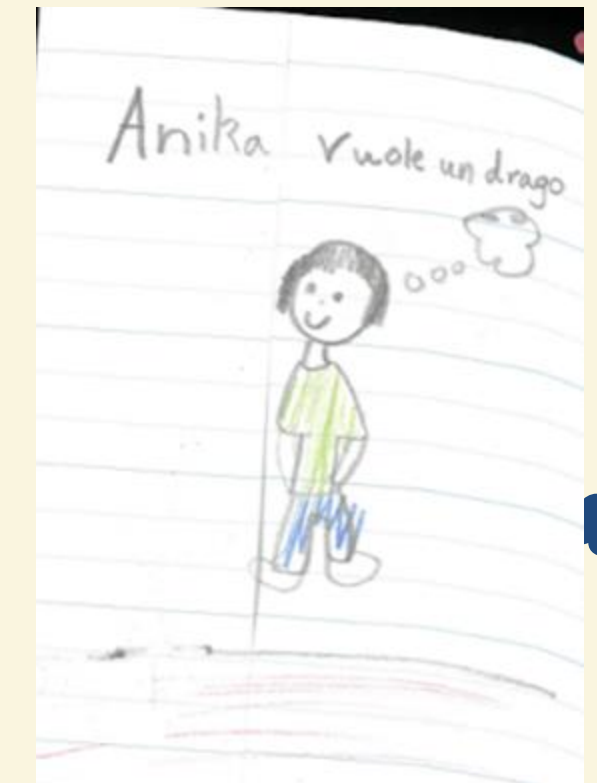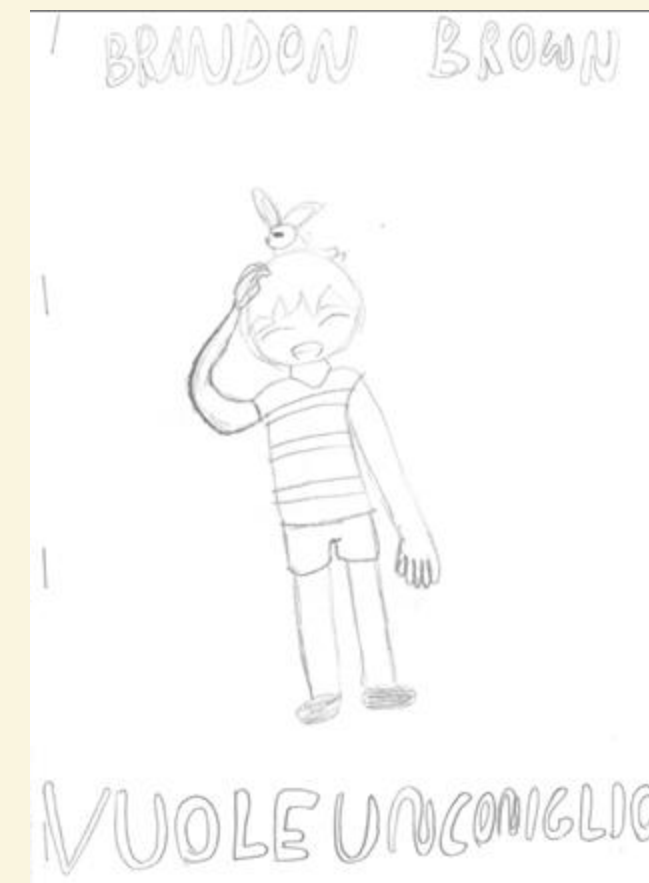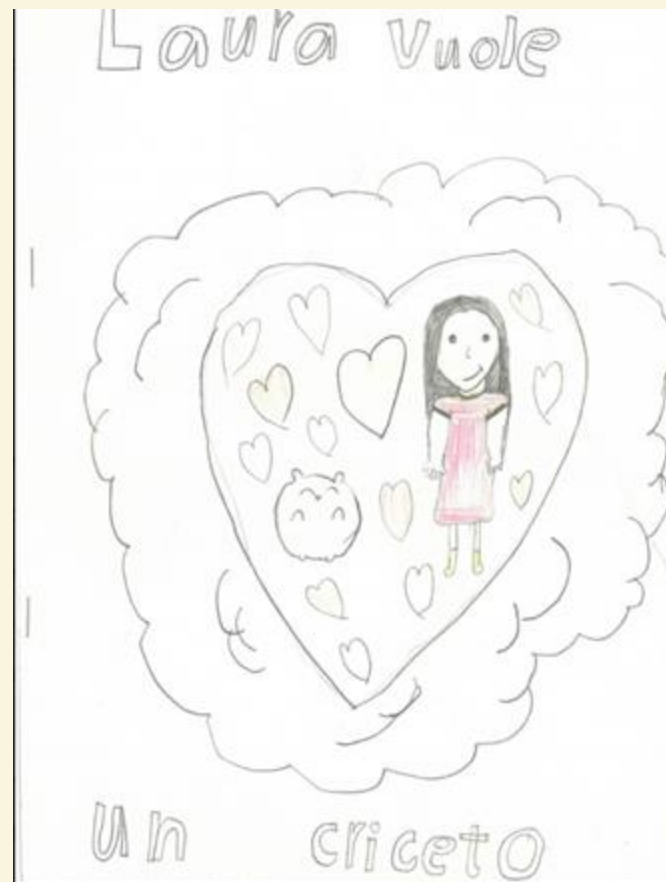La storia è ambientata _____

_____

Il mio voto: ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

👍 Mi piace perché _____

👎 Non mi piace perché _____
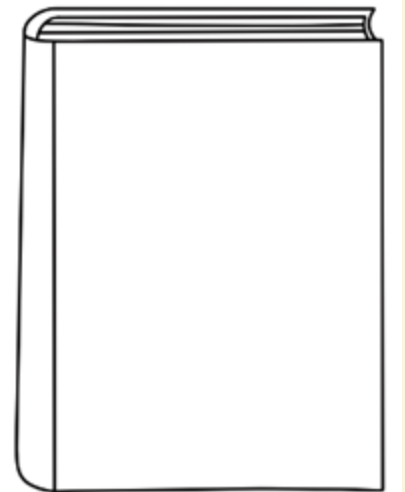
Scriviamo

Conclusion

THE MAIN THINGS WE NOW KNOW FROM RESEARCH ARE THAT STRONG BILINGUAL PROGRAMS:

➔ **CAN** HELP STUDENTS IN THEIR OVERALL LITERACY SKILLS
➔ **DO NOT** DETRACT FROM LEARNING IN OTHER SUBJECTS
➔ **CAN** BENEFIT ALL LEARNERS

Genesee, 2015; Fielding & Harbon, 2020

KEY FINDING:

BILINGUAL STREAM STUDENTS PERFORM AT LEAST TO THE SAME LEVEL AS THE NON-BILINGUAL STREAM AND MANY SHOW SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER RESULTS IN LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT.

WHAT HAS OUR RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA FOUND?

We compared two distinct streams of students across three schools. Approximately half of the students opted in to a bilingual stream in which they learned other subjects through an additional language for 1 to 1.5 hours a day. The remaining students did not participate in the bilingual stream of learning at all, they learnt an additional language as a subject for approximately 30 to 60 minutes a week.

We found that the 'bilingual stream' outperformed the 'non-bilingual stream' on all literacy aspects of the NAPLAN test. At Year 3 they outperformed by an average of 8%. At Year 5 by an average of 6%. Further statistical analyses revealed that students in the bilingual stream performed at a statistically significant higher level than their peers in the non- bilingual stream in all four of the literacy test sub-sections of reading, writing, spelling and grammar and punctuation.

THE STATISTICS FOR THE YEAR 5 RESULTS WERE:

2014 Reading = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 555.82, SD = 67.44) and non-bilingual streams (M = 496.03, SD = 70.23; t (286) = 7.24, p = 0.000).

2014 Writing = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 518.58, SD = 54.97) and non-bilingual streams (M = 479.48, SD = 57.54; t (286) = 5.79, p = 0.000).

2014 Spelling = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 570.94, SD = 51.48) and non-bilingual streams (M = 522.88, SD = 68.55; t (286) = 6.46, p = 0.000).
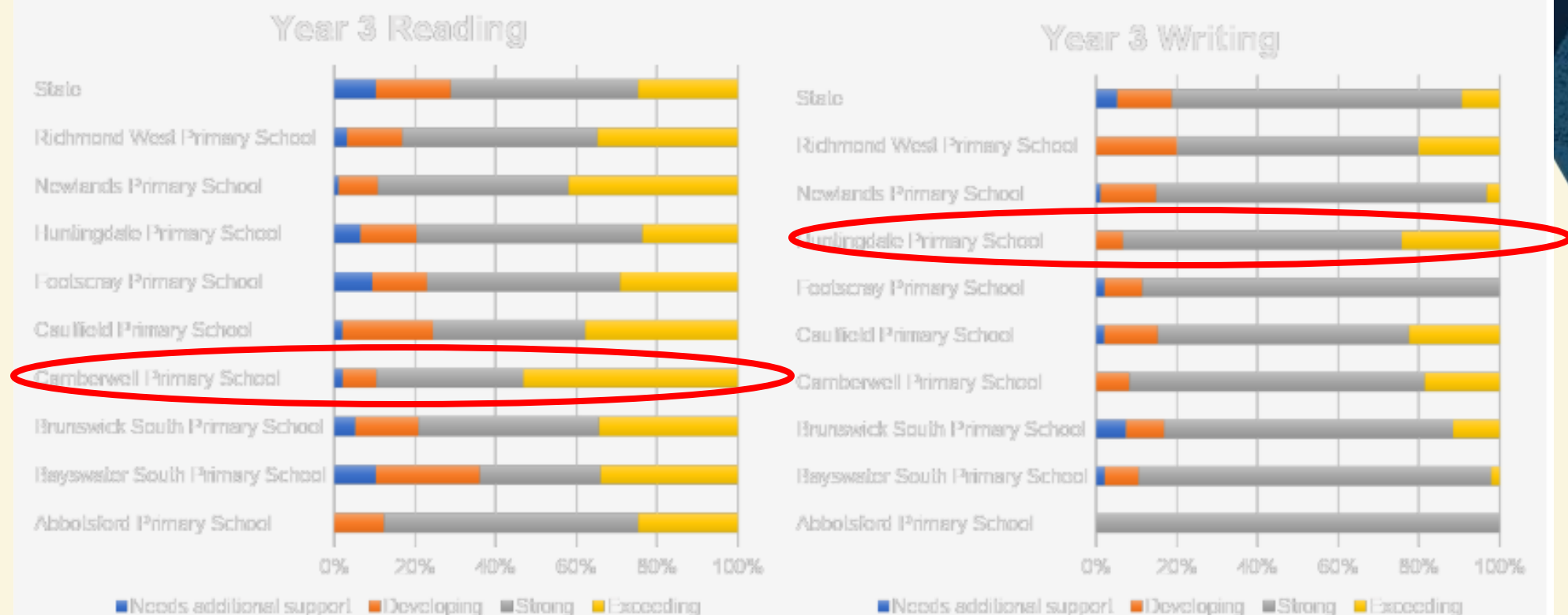
2014 Grammar and Punctuation = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 584.54, SD = 78.78) and non-bilingual streams (M = 516.17, SD = 85.47; t (286) = 6.91, p = 0.000).

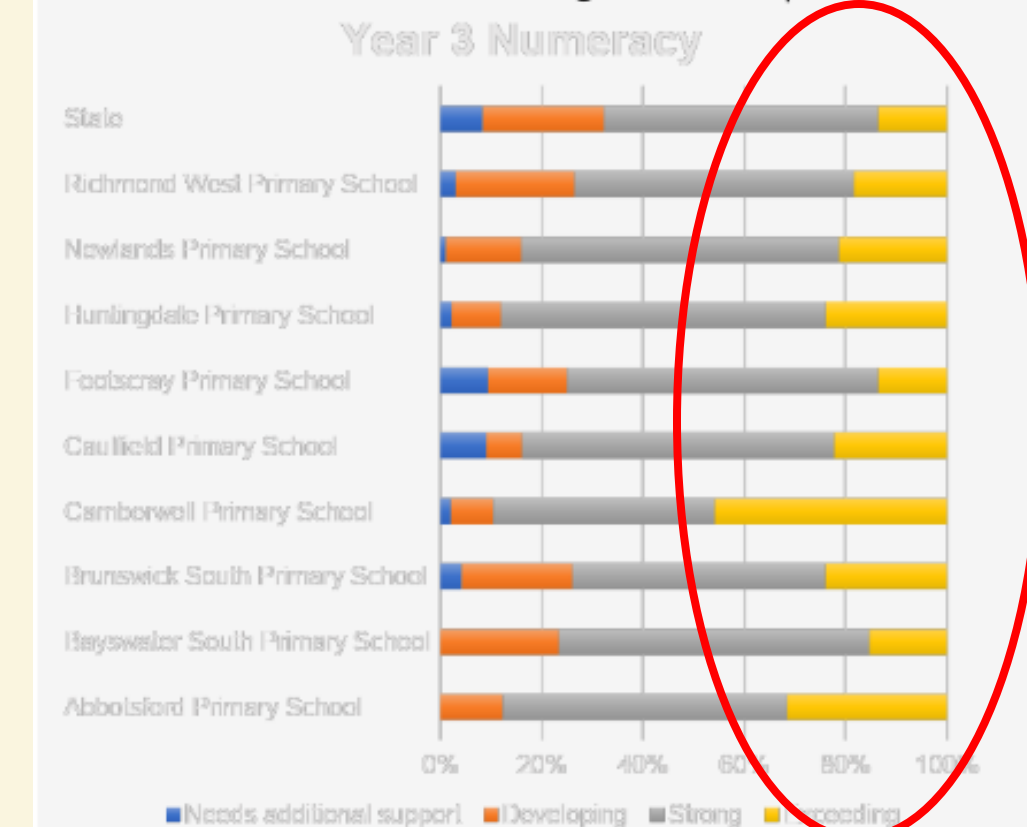Victorian government school bilingual programs

NAPLAN Overall Performance Comparison

How did students in the bilingual schools perform in Reading and Writing compare with the State levels?

Overall Performance Comparison

How did students in the bilingual schools perform in Numeracy compare with the State levels?
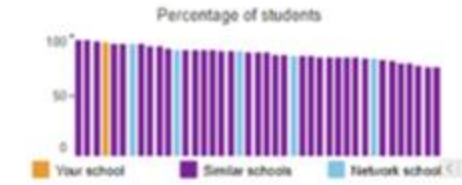
CAULFIELD PRIMARY
コーフィールド小学校

Naplan Numeracy Year 5 - % of students Exceeding or Strong between 2023 & 2024

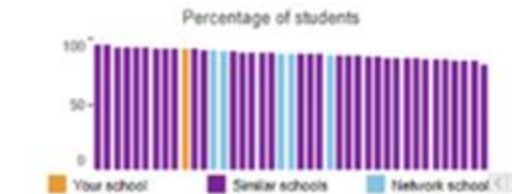**93%** Your school **85%** Similar schools **86%** Network

Naplan Reading Year 5 - % of students Exceeding or Strong between 2023 & 2024

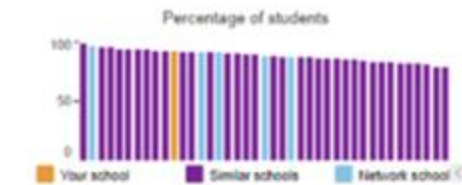**92%** Your school **89%** Similar schools **89%** Network

Naplan Writing Year 5 - % of students Exceeding or Strong between 2023 & 2024

91% Your school **87%** Similar schools **89%** Network

Graphics shared above are a summary of the percentage of students achieving Exceeding and Strong results between 2023 and 2024 for Year 5 Numeracy, Reading and Writing. The graphics indicate our school (orange) placed against similar schools (purple) and network schools (light blue). All data shared identifies performance above similar school and network averages. When you benchmark this data against school context and the reality of our students learning all mathematics content in Japanese and having a large proportion of Japanese literacy alongside their English literacy it begins to dispel some of the mistruths around bilingual education. You can find out more about our bilingual program by visiting the link (please internally link to title Bilingual Education Benefits).

Caulfield Primary School
https://www.caulfieldps.vic.edu.au/articles/84

Comparison to Similar Background School

How did bilingual school students perform compare to mainstream school students with similar background?

2023 NAPLAN results

Camberwell Primary School

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar	Numeracy
Year 3	471	448	448	472	476
Year 5	565	538	548	579	572

Student background

Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)

School ICSEA value	1182
Average ICSEA value	1000
School ICSEA percentile	99

Distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA)

- School distribution
- Australian distribution

Camberwell South Primary School

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar	Numeracy
Year 3	457	447	456	447	462
Year 5	551	530	523	525	534

Student background

Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)

School ICSEA value	1172
Average ICSEA value	1000
School ICSEA percentile	98

Distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA)

- School distribution
- Australian distribution

Grazie!

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