



# *Mountains and Starry Skies*

A personal account  
of the International Parents Alliance  
Parent Summit 2024



# Summary

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*Text and artwork by Emanuele Bertolani*

# Arrival

23/10/2024

We reach Tbilisi airport as the last remnants of daylight sink beneath a foreign horizon.

Together with our driver, whose English is as good as my non-existing Russian, we ride on the motorway for a while, with road signs in the sinuous Georgian script, small shops and large neon crosses flashing by us.

When we reach the grounds of the Amonashvili Estate, we are met by Nino, one of the members of the younger generation currently managing the operations of the Estate. Dinner's ready for us, restoring G., my travelling companion, and myself to better spirits. Bread is thick, and quite sturdy. My compatriot Dante Alighieri, was famously unhappy with non-Tuscanian bread while in exile. I rather like it.

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The ancients believed that once you tasted the food of another land, a part of you belonged to it forever.

I'm here for IPA's Parent Summit. It's an important event that takes place every two years. We all worked very hard to make it successful. As relative newcomer among IPA's staff, I have my reasons to feel a little anxious.

Once in my room, I make a quick call home to tell my family I've arrived safely. The bed looks positively comfortable. I struggle with the room's door until G., who probably heard me from nextdoor, peeps in and says: "you do know that you need to pull the handle upwards to lock it, right? It's like in Britain, they've got the same system".

The door locks perfectly. In the silence of the new environment, among feelings of anticipation for the upcoming days, sleep doesn't come easily.

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# The City

24/10/2024

The crisp, fresh morning air fills my lungs as I head towards the refectory. After a few steps, I'm left breathless. The snow-capped summits of the Caucasus rise like giants from the bottom of the valley, shining in the morning light. I've always been fond of mountains. One of my colleagues will later voice my own feelings: "imagine this, 2000 years ago. How could people possibly not believe that gods were living up there?"

I reunite with G., and we are later joined by A., who has been here before with his family, and E. When A. tells us that there's something magical about this place, and describes the activities that children engage in while their parents train in Humane Pedagogy during the 8-day Summer Courses, I believe him. I keep staring at the mountains, and feel very clearly that even though I was born far away, a part of me belongs here.



The whole IPA team reunites, and with the welcome company of three doctoral candidates from one of the projects we participate in, we set off for a tour of Tbilisi. We are accompanied by David, a local guide with an immense knowledge of all things Georgian, and an equally immense fondness for this land ever-present drink: wine.

“A party without wine is a like a wedding without a fight” says David, half-jokingly.

The winding route, once part of the Silk Road, crosses a mountain pass surrounded by lush forests in full autumn foliage.

In Tbilisi, we jump on a cable car to reach a vantage point and observe the city from high ground. The mixture of ancient buildings and modern architecture reveals that, like most things in Georgia, its capital too is the result of centuries of intercultural exchange, the combination of many co-existing traditions.



A striking statue rises on the top of a hill overlooking the city. It's a woman holding a sword in her right hand, and what looks like a cup in her left hand.

“That's Georgia” says David, pointing at the imposing monument. “It says: whoever you are, if you come as a friend here's our wine. Let's party. But if you come as an enemy, here's our sword. Let's fight”.

By the way he looks, I know he means every word.

On the way down, I notice something. We are all engaged in conversation, but it's no small talk. I have the distinct feeling that whomever I talk to, they are genuinely interested in the exchange. Bit by bit, despite being quite an introvert, I start gaining confidence and open up. I really start feeling part of the group.





I once had a Georgian colleague who told me that pomegranate is a staple of Georgian cuisine, but I wasn't expecting to see that many sold all over the city, both in large grocery stores and small stalls. Many are equipped with a squeezer to make pomegranate juice right on the spot!



Quite surprisingly, Tbilisi has a long tradition of thermal baths. We are told they are very ancient, and have recently been refurbished after years of neglect.

In the final part of our tour, the one that will mean the most to me, we pay a visit to the Peace Cathedral. It is a Church, with a Synagogue and a Mosque built on the same ground. It's dedicated to interfaith dialogue, to the point that the mosque was built with alms from the Jewish population, and the synagogue with donations from the Muslim population.

“Who are you?” asks the Bishop in a soft, Oxford-accented voice, as we sit around him. There's a whole world in this question. To me, it's an invitation to intimate self-reflection. I'm a man on a quest, that's for sure. What defines “I”, though? Lately I've been thinking that it may be my actions, but I'm not so sure.

We are a very diverse team. There are Jews, Christians, and Muslims among us. Perhaps even agnostics. In silence of these sacred places, as the Bishop shows us around, I realise that we are together. Not because we happen to be in the same place at the same time, but because we share the same purpose.





Energised by our encounters and discoveries, it's now time to get to work. The first engagement is a Multiplier Event for SILENT, an EU-funded project that empowers hearing families of deaf children by providing educational resources to enhance language skills, communication competencies, and resilience. As a parent, I find it particularly commendable that efforts have been made to provide support for families to tackle these challenges, in addition to those naturally associated with raising children.

The setting in Tbilisi, at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, adds an international tone to this important event.



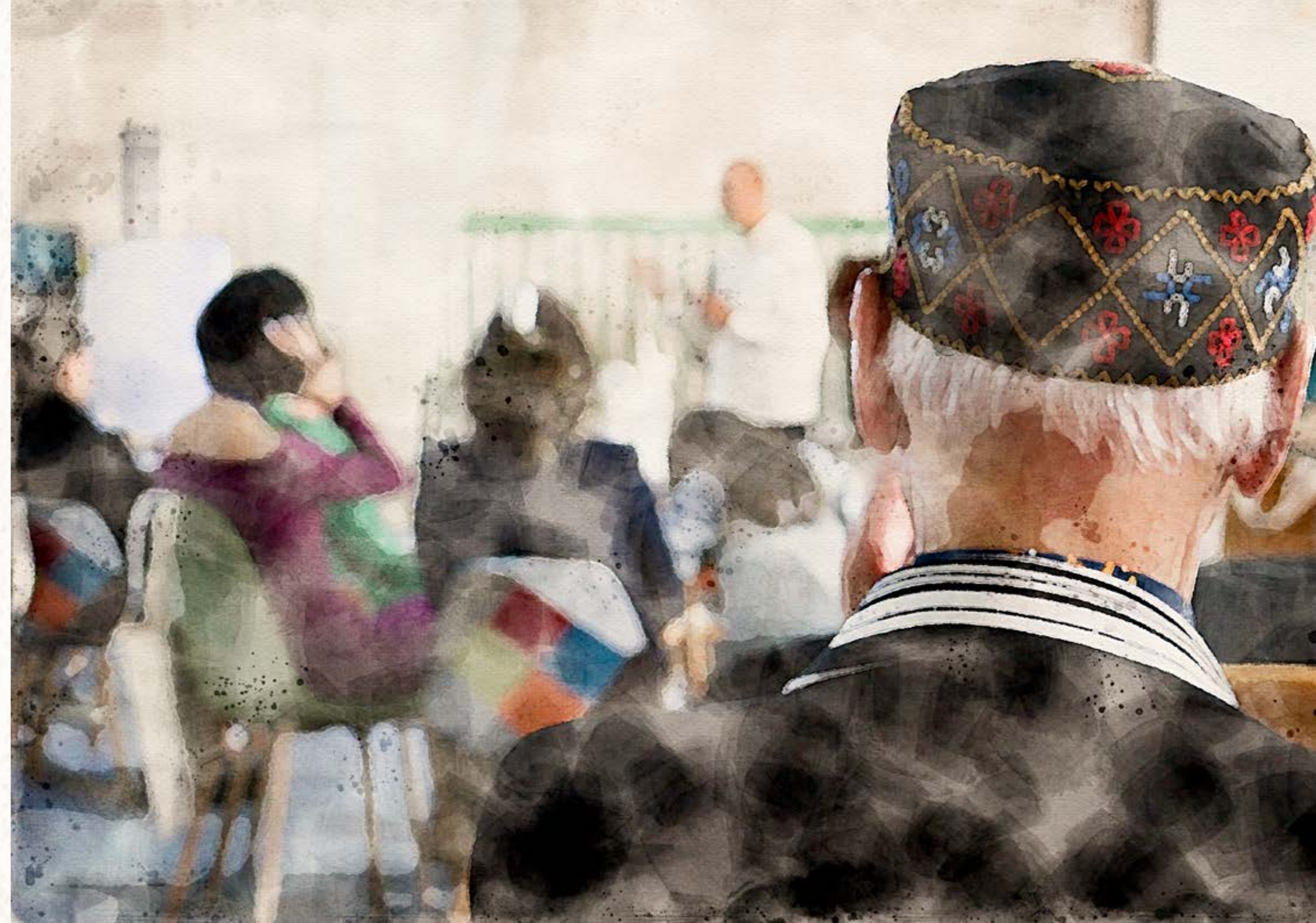
# *The Summit*

25-26/10/2024

“My name is Paata. It means ‘small’. As you can see, it didn’t happen, but my inner soul always says ‘be smaller, be smaller’. And so I try”. As the tall man in a white shirt speaks, 93-year-old Sharval Amonashvili, founder of the Humane Pedagogy, nods in approval.

I can relate to Paata’s words. They remind me of my time as an English teacher, learning about “student-centred” methods. Slowly training myself to focus on my students, not on my own ego. Giving them agency to be the authors of their own learning, instead of passive recipients of my knowledge.

I’ve learnt how to make it work with children, but I’ve never seen it applied to adults. I don’t know it yet, but I’m about to.



The Parent Summit centres around four topics:

1. Education for Democracy
2. Preventing Cyberbullying
3. Parental Engagement
4. Building healthier, sustainable environments for children.

Each topic is rooted in actions and results from many of the projects the International Parents Alliance is involved in:

PARTICIPATE, focused on training researchers to address cyberbullying

PERFECT, integrating collaborative cultural production and performance into the curriculum

BIOBEO, developing and implementing educational programmes to enhance engagement with the bioeconomy and circular lifestyles



DRONE, promoting digital literacy among vulnerable groups and combat disinformation

DEMOCRAT, promoting democratic values in EU education by developing curricula for responsible citizenship in response to societal challenges

EFFEct, aiming to enhance education quality across the EU by providing evidence-based policy recommendations on diversity, equity, inclusion, digital transition, and instructional efficiency

KITCHEN ADVENTURE, promoting healthy, sustainable cooking among families through interactive online sessions.

We are also drawing inspiration from two guest projects from our partner ESHA (European School Heads Association).

SUPERCYBER KIDS, teaching cybersecurity to children aged 8-13

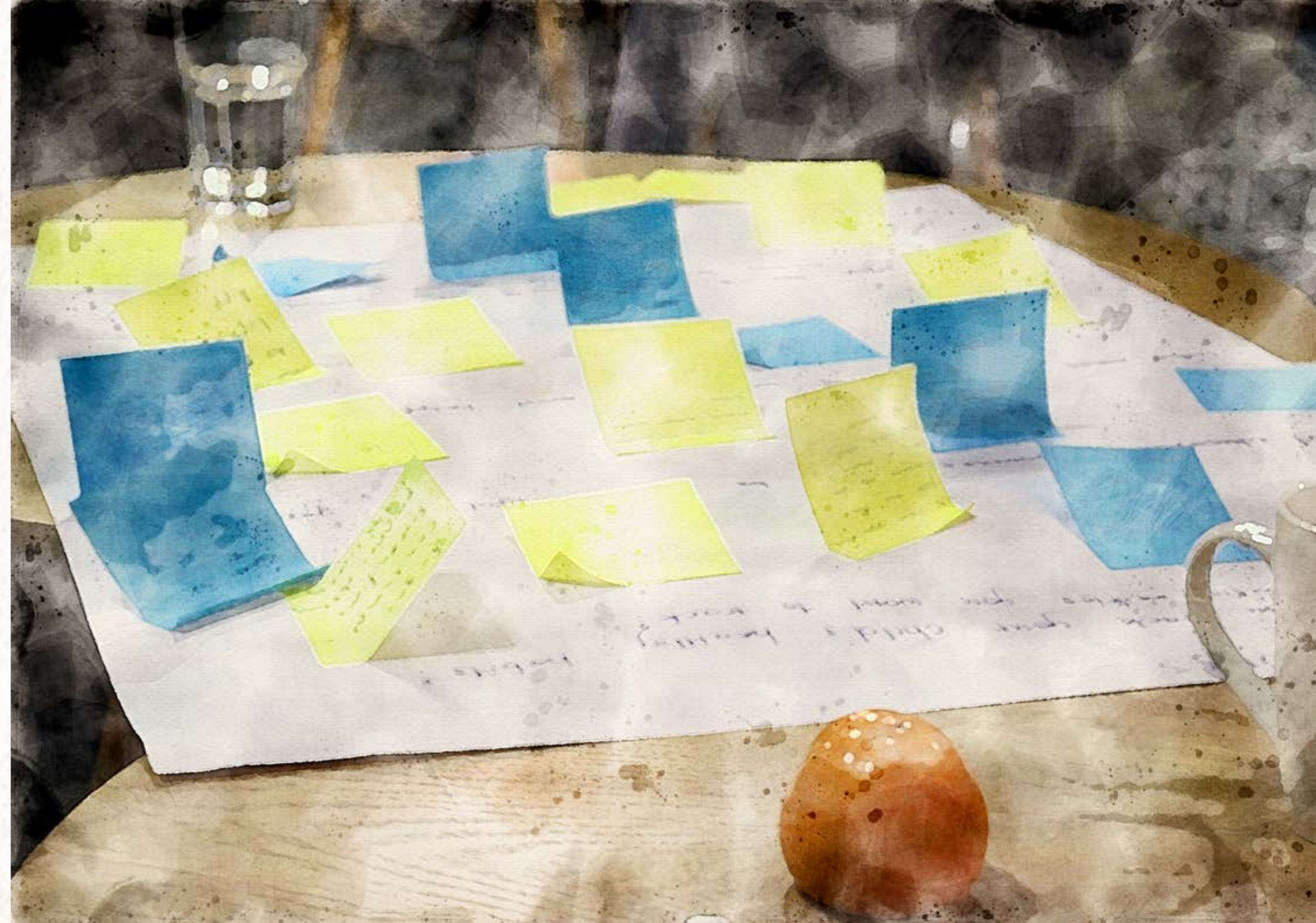


through a gamified learning platform.

BIOSTREAMS, focused on reducing childhood obesity through data-driven, personalized health interventions and community engagement

I was expecting to sit comfortably and listen to interesting, well-structured presentations, but that's not quite the IPA training method. If I were to describe it in one word, it would be "hands-on". Presentations are short, focussed on data and research results. Participants work in small groups, share ideas, discuss, debate, sometimes even disagree, but ever in the spirit of trying hard to understand each other's point of view and negotiate communication.

There's discreet, minimally-invasive supervision by the presenters-trainers. With participants coming from all over the world and all walks of life, the discussions soon turn into an incredibly enriching, rewarding experience.



I find myself acknowledging that in a setting like this “diversity” is not a buzz word. There’s real value in it. Sometimes, even wisdom. Everybody is benefitting from everybody’s experience and insights. The discussions aren’t limited to analysing problems: they’re oriented towards actionable solutions. What’s more, they’re all based on research evidence, which helps keeping the conversation grounded.

I usually tend to keep quite. I’d rather listen and learn than express my opinion. However, it’s clear from the onset that everybody is expected to contribute. So, I try to bring my best to the table. And while my two cents aren’t necessarily the best, I do feel that all contributions are valued.

When my time comes to lead a workshop, I feel a familiar combination of adrenaline and excitement. I’ve been in this spot before, but this time it’s different. It’s meaningful, and interesting. I’d say it’s also a lot of fun.



At the end of Day one, we're all tired, but it's the "good" tired. It takes a lot of energy to focus on discussing a range of different topics. Many of them require critical reflection on my actions as a teacher and a parent. It's not easy for me, but when I consider the outcomes, I think it's well-worth. I'm learning a lot.

Day two runs in a similar fashion. Interactions are rich and complex, but smoother. We've come to know each other.

After the closing remarks by Paata and International Parents Alliance Director Eszter Salamon bring the Parent Summit to a successful conclusion, all the IPA staff gather for a quieter, but equally important meeting. We literally come from all over the world, this is a unique opportunity to spend quality time together as a team, with nearly all members of our Supervisory Board present, sharing progress and discussing concerns.



# *Mzianeti*

26/10/2024

After the second day of the Parent Summit ends, we are given a tour of the Amonashvili Estate. It's the work of multiple generations oriented by the same guiding principles. When families come here, parents participate in training while children become citizens of Mzianeti, "Sun City". The ones and the others alike abide by three simple rules:

Love everyone

Live with dignity

Work for good will





During his opening statement, Paata said something that impressed me deeply.

“Every time we see pain and suffering in the world around us, we try to react by acts of beauty”.

That’s something to think about. It echoes Dostoevskij’s famous quote from *The Idiots*, where prince Myshkin is reported as having said that beauty will save the world. To me, it’s reminiscent of the ancient Greek concept kalos kai agathos, the idea that that which is beautiful is conducive to that which is good, and vice versa.

These things are given a concrete representation here, through the work of both adults and of children. I find myself thinking: imagine how motivated you would be if you could see your “city”, the place where you live and work with your family and friends, become more beautiful for everyone as a consequence of your efforts.



As we continue our walk through rose gardens and buildings shaped by dreams and hopes for a better future, I think of all my companions, and our hosts. In spite of the little time we have spent together, I feel a new bond of respect for them. I do hope we'll have the chance to meet soon, and work together again.

I feel that wherever we are, we'll be united by our commitment to advancing children rights and parental engagement. I feel that, by hard work and good will, new possibilities will open for parents and professional educators.



# *The stars are visible tonight*

*27/10/2024*

As I walk from the refectory back to my room after our last dinner at the International Parents Alliance Parent Summit, I receive one final, unexpected gift. Whenever I travel, after dark I look for the Northern Star, knowing that my family at home are doing the same. It's been cloudy ever since I've arrived here, but now the sky has cleared.

“The stars are visible tonight” I say to myself, looking upwards. In a few hours, I'll be on my way to the airport. Then I'll have work to do, trainings to plan, and so on. But right now, I'm here. And I'm so grateful for the people I've met, and the things I've learnt.

*Emanuele Bertolani*