

POLAND – ACTION RESEARCH, CASE STUDIES

NOTE: These initiatives are an absolute exception in Poland – it really time for the Polish researchers to uncover them. In Poland there is no structured form of contacts between older people and children in formal settings.

1. Flying Grannies (Latające Babcie)

Introduction

Flying Grannies are a group of senior volunteers who visit libraries, children’s hospitals and children’s homes to perform their own poems and stories for children.

The group was initiated in 2009 by Urszula Machcińska, who took part in writing and storytelling course organized by Stowarzyszenie kobiety.lodz.pl (Association women.lodz.pl), local women’s organization. She wanted to go on with writing for children and to continue to enjoy the exchange with other women when the course was over. So with the support of Stowarzyszenie kobiety.lodz.pl, she applied for external financing and received the grant. The group belongs to Stowarzyszenie kobiety.lodz.pl volunteers.



The group receive invitations from different institutions in and outside Łódź and visit them occasionally. With some of the institutions (e.g. Fundacja “Dom w Łodzi” – “Home in Łódź” Foundation that runs children’s home for seriously ill children and Fundacja Jaś i Małgosia (Hansel and Gretel Foundation) – therapy centre for children with autism) they have close, permanent contact and they visit them on daily basis. In the preschools they also organize and conduct, with the support of psychologist, “empathic workshops” applying Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication.¹ For the purpose of the workshops Flying Grannies write “emphatic stories” that refer to emotions, self-esteem and relations, which are the base for games and play facilitated by psychologist. Flying Grannies have published two books for children.

¹ Nonviolent Communication focuses on three aspects of communication: self-empathy (towards yourself), empathy (towards others), and honest self-expression.

An interesting feature of the project is that it embraces many generations: there are the young children, a teenage girl, Ola, who gives support with the project website, 30-40 year old specialists (psychologist, literary consultant) and seniors: 14 women and 1 men aged 55-75 years.

How do the different generations benefit?

For the volunteers it is important, that also in this phase of their life they can do something that is useful and meaningful for other people, especially those in need, and that is at the same time challenging and satisfying for themselves.

The crucial experience of Flying Grannies is the happiness of children they meet and perform for. Children enjoy very much their performances and are amazed by colourful costumes - ***"They won't let us go!"***

Writing, performing and interacting with children are passions of all group members - ***"We love what we do"***, they say. Flying Grannies bring to reality their dreams about writing and performing: ***"We fulfil our unfulfilled dreams. I wanted to be an actress and it didn't work out, now I feel great being on stage in the same role"***. The joy of developing their own talents is also connected with hard work – "It is a way to perfect your character, you need to accept critique".

Anti-violence and antidiscrimination activities are also important for the members of the group. They participate in local city actions, events, discussions and conferences about these topics. By getting involved in these kinds of actions, they share their wisdom, life-experience and values.

Still, the most important are the direct contacts with children. In a residential children's home for seriously ill children where they are regular guests, each Granny received her own new title from the children e.g. "Cuddle Granny", "Hug Granny". The children that have no biological parents and grandparents build meaningful relationships with these special "grannies"

Constraints and challenges

The biggest challenge is financing and project administration, because it consumes time of the members of the group (they perform all the tasks on the basis of volunteering).

Being involved in so many activities that are not linked with home or work is a big change for many of the group members. "Leaving" the house has a special meaning for women who are traditionally expected to take care of the everyday life at home, and housework, but nothing else. One of the Grannies said: "We just had our fiftieth marriage anniversary. My husband told me: "For fifty years you were at home. And now, after fifty years, you are not there!" There is visible tension in this traditional role model, but first reactions of all the partners of group members, were turning into more positive ones and some of the husbands are actively supporting the group, e.g. in preparing the costumes.

More information:

<http://www.latajacebabcie.pl/>

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2. The Academy of Supergrandmother and Supergrandfather (Akademia Superbabci i Superdziadka)



Introduction

The Academy of Supergrandmother and Supergrandfather (Akademia Superbabci i Superdziadka) in Lublin is a school for grandparents to learn more about their grandparenting role and to engage in volunteer work with children. The Academy has two goals:

- To offer support to grandparents regarding developmental psychology, pedagogy etc., so they can apply knowledge in accompanying their grandchildren, playing with them and fostering their development,
- To offer grandparents chance to take care of themselves – learn about senior health, establish contacts with new people, find new forms of spending time and relaxing.

It became a part of program implemented by another association, Towarzystwo Inicjatyw Twórczych Ę, that wants to promote the idea and facilitate opening new Academies

in new locations. There are already two others: in Białystok and Warsaw. The account below is based on interview with a group of 'supergrandmothers' who visit children's centres.

The leader of the project, Zofia Zaorska (PhD) (69 years) had been teaching adult education in Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (Lublin) and for many years had coordinated the activities of The University of the Third Age in Lublin. When she became a grandmother, she realized that she has been always working with adults and that she needed a place where she could get a support in the new role of grandmother. In 2008 she established the School of Super-grandmother in cooperation with a local NGO and community centre. Already in the first year there was a lot of interest in the activities of the School. Since then every year around 30 new people join the project. Until now, in spite of wide promotion and invitation directed to men, only one man has become involved. Explaining this, the supergrandmothers interviewed assume that it is because children rearing, which is in the focus of the Academy, is alien to men of their age, although they observe that this pattern is different in younger generations.

Senior volunteering is one of the activities offered in School and it is regarded as natural part of the School. There are 20 volunteers that form two groups: a theatre group and a story-tellers group. Both groups consist of present and ex-students of the School. They visit Early Childhood Education Centres (ECEC) settings to meet with children and perform for them.

How do the different generations benefit?

For the seniors involved in volunteering the most important thing is reactions of children – their happiness and astonishment over performances. After one of the performances in preschool, a child asked: **"Are you from the outer space?!"** – it gave the volunteers feeling that they offer to children something very special and it makes them also feel special. The volunteers are happy that they can do something for others: **"We can give so much to children"**. The volunteers gain

also a lot personally: ***"We are more self-confident and cheerful"*** and they go beyond their comfort zone to realize that they actually can do much more than they expected - ***"I have never thought that I would dare to perform!"***; ***"Supergrandmother takes up new challenges and roles she would never imagined"***. They also have a lot of fun during preparations and performances! And they do something that is attractive for their grandchildren: ***"My granddaughter is proud that her grandmother performs in the theatre!"*** They believe that children benefit from these meetings, because they experience something new, which is good for their development. They also point out that many children have no other chances to meet older people that do not belong to their families.

The volunteers also claim that their performances are very calm and serene, there is no scary elements, as often happens in professional theatre shows. The performances are based on widely known fairy-tales, such as "Hansel and Gretel", Polish traditions and poems for children. They create warm atmosphere for exchange after the performance, for which they always take a lot of time.

Constraints and challenges

According to Zofia Zaorska, the biggest challenge is the stereotyped view older people have of themselves. ***"Seniors do not have a need to learn, because they think they are competent enough"***. Often it is only after joining the Academy do they start to reflect on their own behaviour, for example towards their grandchildren. They realize that the way they behave is often rooted in their own experiences and they revise their understanding of adult- child relationship.

A big obstacle is financing. Although the Academy is valued by the local government, it does not receive any financial support from it, apart from possibility of using the room in community centre for the meetings. This means that Academy needs to compete with all the other initiatives on national level in preparing application forms for grants, which very often is beyond abilities of the group. The problems start already with regulations that are usually long and written in technical language, which makes it very difficult to read and understand for older people.

More information:

<http://www.superbabcia.org.pl/>

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