

ITALY- ACTION RESEARCH, CASE STUDIES

1. Elderly and Children together (Anziani e Bambini insieme)

Introduction

This is a modern IG centre, which hosts a day centre and a nursing home for the elderly and a nursery for children in the 0 – 3 age range. The realization of the project relies upon the integration of these three services and the implementation of activities which involve the participation of both young and old guests.

The centre originated in the project “Elderly and Children together”, which was conceived and realized by

UNICOOP, a cooperative company involved in the management of educational, social and health services in the province of Piacenza (Northern Italy). The aim of the project was to create space, time and opportunities for elderly and children to get in contact with each other and overcome IG barriers. In 2009 the project led to the realization of the IG Centre. Currently there are 39 children attending the nursery part, 54 guests living in the nursing home and 20 elders being hosted in the day care centre.

The motivation behind the whole project lies in the attempt to define a strategy of intervention capable of recovering IG relationships and rediscovering social solidarity. The key element is the IG centre: a social and educational meeting place for the elderly, the children and their families, as well as for the staff and the volunteers involved.

The project was conceived to respond to some specific local needs: the need to renovate an old building, set in very heart of the city and already used as an old people’s home; the need to allocate a new place to host the public day centre for the elderly; the need for a nursery for young children in the centre of the city. The solution was “easily” found: in 2 years the old age home has been renovated and reorganised to host the three services in the same building.

The starting point was the idea that seniors and children can do well together and that the IG contact is a benefit for both. Due to the lack of scientific and cultural references – especially within the Italian setting – this idea originally arose out of intuition, supported by a 20-year professional experience and knowledge of local social services. The main source of inspiration



was the example of some IG projects realized in France (the first one carried out in Lyon since 1993).

How do the different generations benefit?

The seniors and young children get regularly involved in common activities, usually in small groups (maximum 12 people each). These include graphic arts and painting workshops, storytelling and reading activities, cooking workshops, gardening and outdoor activities. They also share common lunches or breaks and occasionally have birthday parties, parties with parents, walks outside in the park or along the tree-lined path.

The opportunity for these interactions puts into effect the idea that "every generation has something to give to the others". On one hand, the interaction with the elders has a positive effect on the process of socialization of the children: they develop the ability to relate to adults outside of their family. **"My daughter recognizes and greets the "gramps" of the centre, addressing them by name. Grandpa Franco is her favourite one"**. (Francesca Cavallini, mother of Bice, 3 years old). **"I am happy to let my daughter introduce me to people who are friends to her, while strangers to me"** (Valentina Sulzani, early childhood services coordinator, reporting the glowing words of another mother).

On the other hand, the seniors, with their pace slowing down, naturally meet the needs for attention of children and can support their social, emotional and cognitive growth. In addition, the contact with the elderly has another educational value: children get used to the disability of elder people. They do not develop prejudices and naturally learn to accept the others, no matter which physical or motor limitation they might have. **"The best example is grandpa Ubaldo's walker, with children pushing and hanging on as it was a cart."** (Elena Giagosti, project coordinator).

Moreover, through the contact with children, the seniors beneficiaries regain possession of their adult identity. Children bring back the memories of their past, help them feel useful in the present and enjoy the wait for tomorrow. **"It's gratifying to see our old guests with the kids: they get infected by their energy, enthusiasm and smiles, and change their mood and attitude toward life"** (Nuccia, healthcare worker). Children fill up the empty time of the elders and give them new objectives so that they are pushed not to give into laziness and to maintain a positive, active and creative vision of life. **"It's the case of grandma Tea, under depression before coming to the centre. Once here, with the kids she was born again and gained a new lease of life. And it is the case of grandpa Franco: he never misses the opportunity to stay with the children, waits for them, looks for them, takes them in his arms"** (Valentina Sulzani, early childhood services coordinator). **"I did not know about the nest when I moved here 2 years ago. It was a discovery and a pleasure I had never felt before. I am alone in the world, no sons or nephews. Now these children are my enthusiasm and my passion. I've become fond of them and in summer, when the nest is closed, I miss them ... and that's okay: I can't imagine another place to live now"** (Franco, senior beneficiary, 80 years old).

Finally, plenty of unplanned interactions happen every day along the corridors, in common spaces, outside in the garden or through a window. They just come from "the unexpected" and spontaneously turn into a greeting, a smile, a laugh or an improvised game. **"The unexpected is the walker of grandfather Ubaldo"** (Elena Giagosti, coordinator) or **"the surprise when former children come to visit the old gramps of the centre"** (Franco, senior beneficiary, 80 years old). This is the tangible sign of the sustainability of the project. The outputs are not limited to games and workshops: they are about building relations and bringing a social and cultural message of IG solidarity inside and outside the centre.

Constraints and challenges

The seniors are not always willing to be involved in activities with children: they have their own pace, depending on their physical or health conditions or even on their moods. For this reason they are never forced to participate in any group activity or are allowed remain on the sidelines as observers. However, this is not an obstacle to the implementation of the activities since many seniors attend the centre, some of them particularly enthusiastic about staying with children.

- Children and seniors establish a real emotional relationship with the implicit risk of a painful separation, which inevitably comes when 4-year children leave the nursery and move to another school. However, the experience has shown that the "emptiness" left by the children in the elderly is soon overcome with the arrival of new children every year. A painful separation could also be experienced by children in case of death of a "grandfather" which they are particularly attached to. These risks are addressed through the supervision of the professionals, aimed at avoiding that seniors and children – depending on their own character and sensitivity – could get carried away and build particularly symbiotic relations. Moreover, children easily learn to distinguish between their "real" grandparents and their senior playmates in the centre.

- The lack of a childcare centre for children over 3 years is a limitation of the project. ***"Unfortunately next year my 3-year old daughter will move to another school and interrupt the experience with the elders of the centre. That's a pity. I think most benefits would have come during the coming years of her growth"*** (Francesca Cavallini, mother of Bice).

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2. Hortus Urbis

Introduction



Hortus Urbis is a city garden and an educational project about sustainability and environmental awareness. It contains plants that were cultivated in the Ancient Rome. The main target group is families including all generations. The project also represents an exchange initiative among the different gardens managed by citizens around Rome.

The origin of the project involved the Park of "Appia Antica" Institution, who proposed to an architect group – Zappata Romana, who had previously done a mapping of the gardens in Rome to create a urban garden. The Park Institution was looking for innovative ideas to save and promote the ancient and large green space around Via Appia Antica, which had been abandoned, in order to open an interesting spot to citizens where children and families could find educational outdoor activities. Zappata Romana asked volunteers already active in shared garden projects in different districts to join in a new group for this new initiative.

The garden provides a solution to a common worry about the sustainability, and the future of the new generations: ***"Taking care of the future means taking care of the future of the land, the environment... I see the gardens as an educational example of an IG pact to restore hope and future of the new generations."*** (Meg, 55 years old, female, volunteer)

The motivation of the volunteers is a sense of responsibility and rewarding concrete work. The garden is located in an area of historical significance, with hundreds of daily visitors, including children and school pupils.

How do the different generations benefit?

The two main benefits recognized by the volunteers and organisers are:

-A common learning, for the children as well as for the volunteers. The educational process is based on practical experience, to learn about gardening, environment and nutrition ***"when you put your hands in the earth you understand how are the different plants, such as food plants, medicinal plants, flowers ...children participate actively in the workshops, they have planted, and taken care of the growing ones, or done small manual work such as wood construction of tools or signs"*** (Matteo, 34 years old, male, organiser).

Through the contact with children visiting the garden the volunteers also acquire new knowledge and pedagogical skills.

Parents also benefit as most of them take part with their youngest children (2-5 years old) in the activities, participating in the workshops.

Education for sustainability is a key concept in all the activities. The final goal is to raise awareness among all the age groups, thanks to the involvement of children. A previously abandoned site has become a dynamic space in which the social relations have big importance.

“this place came back to life, every weekend many families got used to come and hundreds are involved during the events” (Matteo, 34 years old, male, organiser). This leads to an exchange of people from different ages.

Constraints and challenges

The main challenge of the initiative regarding the IG aspect is that the contact among generations -especially the contact between seniors and young children - is informal and takes place in an improvised and non planned way, even if they share the same space.

“The fact of putting together children and adults is creating the need for more planning and organization in education and exchange” (Matteo, 34 years old, male, organiser)

However, there are cases in which seniors interact in some activities with children, even if in most cases it is spontaneous ***“so far we have not planned an educational activity ourselves, but often happens that we senior volunteers take care of the children by showing our work and doing things together” (Meg, 55 years old, female, volunteer).***

The actual educational activities such the workshops in the weekends are organised by the experts. According to Meg (volunteer) ***“the change we should do -but I'm not sure if we can do it- would be to manage the learning activities ourselves, but we're still not experienced. Sometimes we talk about it, it is challenging, not all of us are trained in didactics” (Meg, 55 years old, female, volunteer).***

However, the volunteer recognizes that this could be reinforced through the learning exchanges among the group, amongst people from different backgrounds, knowledge and skills (including coaches, psychologists, architects specialised in participative processes).

There are not many seniors in the group of volunteers (4 out of 10 active senior volunteers) . Furthermore it is thought that some senior volunteers view children with indifference or even as a threat more than as a group that could bring benefits. ***“When there are children those who interact more with them are the 30s and 40s, more than the 60s. It would be interesting to understand the motivation of those who keep more distance from children. Especially this is the case for the seniors who have experience cultivating the land, who have been educated in a vision that the approach to the earth is not a game and then it must be done carefully. Instead of the usual 30s and 40s who grew up in the city they live it more like a game.” (Matteo, 34 years old, male, organiser)***

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3. Grandparents in the library (Nonni in biblioteca)

Introduction

In this project senior volunteers who are grandparents of school children organise a library and read and discuss books with children aged 4 to 9 years inside a primary school in a multicultural district of the city of Rome. Volunteers are involved 4 hours weekly. In groups of two the volunteers receive the visit of a class to the library where the children can borrow books. The volunteers also read and discuss books with the children (approx. 400 in total).



The library of the school had been abandoned for years. In 2012 a small group of teachers launched this initiative using the books available in the school and a room that was adapted for this purpose. Thanks to the Parents Association, the teachers were able to recruit 12 senior volunteers among the grandparents of the children.

The main motivation of the project was to offer children a space to become familiar and enjoy books: by renovating a space, making books available (the remarkable collection of books of the Manin Institute) and through IG exchange. The initiative answers to the lack of a library in the neighbourhood and to the need to provide books for those who don't have them at home, since many families came from other countries. The library project also provided opportunities to seize the school activities with the composition of the district population.

The first benefit of the project is the new learning opportunities for children promoting their relationship with books and their interest for knowledge, thanks to grandparent volunteers.

The space in the library create a different atmosphere that the one that children have with teachers in the classroom. It creates the necessary confidence so that kids can explain their experiences, and in this context, seniors can play an important role.

"Children were happy to have a different place and adult" "They have very different backgrounds, and some with many problems; we have more time for these things and it is a great satisfaction when you see changes on them." (Giuliana, senior volunteer, female, 64).

Children become more active, discover new things and are encouraged to talk and express themselves. Thus, it is possible to work directly or indirectly on different abilities of the child. Moreover, seniors can transmit them the critical capacities, to reason and reflect about texts and topics.

«It is important to reason with a child and to give him/her critical thinking skills» (Giuliana, senior volunteer, female, 64).

Furthermore, old volunteers listen to children with interest, and talk about learning from them. ***"children began to talk and tell stories about themselves, the father, the grandfather, their family.... I would stay for hours listening to them"*** (Giuliana, senior volunteer, female, 64).

The volunteers get personal satisfaction from their service; they can contribute with their knowledge and experience, the children are interested in them, which at the same time motivates them even more to continue.

“when you didn't have time to follow your children it's a great benefit for us to build these relations, you can transfer your knowledge” (Carlo, senior volunteer, male, 71).

In many cases the IG exchange is new for them: they don't live with grandparents and children coming from migrant families don't have grandparents in Italy, so they miss their experiences.

“They have different families from ours, we lived altogether with grandparents and there was no TV, the experiences were just told ...they get used and appreciate it” (Giuliana, senior volunteer, female, 64).

“the grandfather, the wise senior, is essential, because these children do not have experience: for them is a discovery, they touch my white hair, my hands, the lines, the veins that come out” “they also need to feel welcomed...it is important to ensure this generational continuity” (Carlo, senior volunteer, male 71)

Constraints and challenges

Even if the library works quite well, the project has faced some constraints and challenges since its beginning:

-Children's participation depends quite a lot on the interest of teacher. Some teachers were very involved while others weren't. In some cases it was seen as a duty, taking time from the formal programme,

“some teachers wondered about the reasons...there are some focused on staying on track with the learning agenda, and who are less attentive to the human aspect: for them the library represents a too big commitment» “in some cases it was even hard to explain why a library” (Alessia, teacher and promoter, female, 42).

-Available time: changes have been made in this sense in order to have a little more time for each group, but this has also meant that fewer class groups attended the library.

-According to the view of some of the elderly, the initiative is less flexible than the after-school activities in which they participate as volunteers, and which are more open. In the library there is a structure and plan that has to be followed.

-Donations have led to a classification difficulty: there are pending books waiting for someone who could devote more time to catalogue them. Moreover, volunteers come out with proposals that cannot be applied due to lack of resources and staff, and they neither had the skills to do it. ***“The loan service is a difficult task especially if you do not know the library, we keep a register but it is not perfect” (Luciano, senior volunteer, male, 73)***

-The risk for the project that if people who have initiated it leave the school, the project finishes, because it depends a lot on their efforts.

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4. **A territory is told through art, music and theater and traditional crafts (Un territorio si racconta tra arte, musica , teatro e antichi mestiere e sapere**

Introduction

One of the main goals of the project, which took place in Poggio Pincenze, was to make children aware of the importance of collective memory and involve older people as active citizens. Their involvement was also meant as a way to preserve the traditions, history and culture of the town. The project also aimed to build sustainable relations, to fight loneliness of the old people in the town and to strengthen the link between generations.

It is important to remember that the villagers experienced the shock of the major earthquake in 2009, that killed three children. The destruction of the old village and its main square lead to a lack of a meeting point for the villagers as a place to live, play, exchange. ***“Any city or village has a square. If not, the values of the square are missing, even in those in which there are the old people having a coffee and playing cards...Life. It is missing a common space in general”***(Danilo, 34, male, expert).



The initiative started two years ago, when the mayor of the town, who was also the head teacher of the school, met a group of experts in creativity and artistic community projects. They planned a 2-year project, involving seniors and children. The local primary school was involved to support the initiative and embed its activities in the school programs.

The project started in 2011-2012: the children visited the old people in their homes, where they were interviewed by the children themselves. The emerging issues were then chosen by the children: love, religious and cultural traditions, the war memories, the school. These themes were the focus of several workshops organised by the experts, using theatre, music and arts, to involve children and seniors. In May 2012, the project culminated in a performance on the streets of the town, where children and seniors showed the ancient crafts and lifestyles from the 1950s.

The second part of the project, called “ancient crafts, ancient knowledge” took as a starting point the work, the results and the methodology used in the previous activities. The grandparents visited the school to show and explain to the children old crafts and jobs and tell them about their memories. Based on this experience, the children, with the support of the teachers and the artistic experts, created a film showing Poggio Pincenze of nowadays and Poggio Pincenze in the 50s.

The project involved almost 60 pupils (4-10 years), 30 active senior volunteers and 100 senior citizens who joined some of the activities. A team of three experts and the teachers of the school managed the initiative.

How do the different generations benefit?

When the seniors took part in the activities they felt so happy that they did not want the activity finished. They could not wait for the time to meet the kids and tell them the stories. In general, going back to school has made the old people feel younger. ***"We went back to our childhood!" (Pio, male, 70)***

When it is possible to involve an old person without grandchildren this brings even greater satisfaction building a relationship that somehow was lacking. ***"They are not happy, they are more than that!" (Antonella, 47, female, expert).***

A tradition that has been partially lost, that is, the meeting of grandparents and children in which the oldest people told stories of personal experiences or fantasy, has been recovered. Grandparents could tell their personal stories, which made them feel useful and refresh their memory and they could contribute to the education of children, retrieving values that they considered important, such as ***"the respect, the value of nature, family, people..." (senior, female, 65 years old)*** and feel satisfied that children enthusiastically participate.

Children and grandparents became main actors: the children became journalists and grandparents told the stories and taught many things. Children have learned a lot about the life in the past and have compared their life with the elderly life in various subjects (the school, love, and even historical subjects such as the war).

Children have learned new concepts, such as the daily activities from the past and they got to know how to describe them step by step ***"grandparents told us the things that were done in the past ...Arianna's grandfather has told us how the dishes were repaired, with iron, a hole was made and attached with iron and glue ...at that time nothing was thrown out ...they didn't have the Play Station! they made the games with other stuff"*** (focus group of children, 6 to 7 year-olds).

They learnt that life can be different, whether better (once, people were more together, the things were repaired, there were original games, pasta was handmade) or worse (the war, beating children in school ***"teachers slapped on the hands!"*** and so they learned to appreciate what they have. In their activities with the old people children also learned the language of arts and crafts.

Furthermore, children are happy with the experience: When the children were asked if there were anything they didn't like about the activities with the seniors they replied: ***Nothing!*** And the most beautiful? ***All of them!*** (focus group with children 7 to 8 years).

Parents also had a positive evaluation: ***"is like sharing a continuation, share the life of our parents but with the eyes of our children"*** (mothers). Even the teachers and Mayor benefitted personally and professionally: they could link the project topics to school programs on the different subjects (history, geography).

Constraints and challenges

This project – now finished - has faced some challenges, though most of them have been overcome.

-The economical resources are very limited, but this has been addressed by looking for sponsors, getting additional resources from parents, experts and the municipality which as prioritized this project.

-The bad weather has been an adverse factor as it has complicated the shooting of the film and the activities had to be postponed in some occasions.

-Being an isolated little town in the mountain meant that at the beginning there were some concern from old people, because of shyness, and not wanting to be disturbed ... but when this barrier was overcome they became strongly involved and committed.

-At some point, due to the educational needs of formal schooling, the meetings with older people had to be stopped, the seniors were sorry about this and always ask when they could come back.

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