

## Learning to be resilient: an intergenerational project to coping with the consequences of an earthquake

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### ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Il progetto “Il Pozzo della Memoria” rappresenta un’interessante esperienza di progetto sociale la cui forte connotazione dialogica e partecipata ha reso possibile la realizzazione di interventi ad hoc per dare risposte ai bisogni autentici dei destinatari reali e potenziali. Il progetto, inizialmente nato con lo scopo di valorizzare i territori della provincia di Bologna dal punto di vista della sostenibilità ambientale e delle storie di sostenibilità, per ritrovare nella memoria dei luoghi e delle persone contesti di equilibrio nel rapporto fra uomo e ambiente, è stato ridefinito in seguito al sisma che ha colpito i territori emiliani nella primavera del 2012.

Il progetto intreccia istanze di educazione alla sostenibilità e alla solidarietà intergenerazionale nel promuovere uno sguardo sul territorio in cui venisse valorizzato il ruolo del dialogo intergenerazionale per recuperare un equilibrio secondo i tre imperativi dello sviluppo sostenibile: economia, ecologia ed equità. La progettazione partecipata, che ha caratterizzato il progetto fin dalla sua ideazione, ha reso possibile ridefinirne gli obiettivi e gli strumenti per fare fronte al terremoto. Il terremoto si è configurato come un evento catastrofico che ha provocato una frattura nelle persone e nei territori. Il progetto ha promosso la mobilitazione di azioni di solidarietà, per contrastare la paura e il senso di impotenza ad essa connesso, coordinando l’attivazione di associazioni, gruppi, persone attraverso un circolo virtuoso dal basso, in cui all’analisi del bisogno seguiva la ricerca di una risposta immediata a quel bisogno, per tornare a una nuova analisi e a nuove risposte, fino a creare un mosaico di risposte solidali ai bisogni dei territori feriti. In questo contributo si intende effettuare una breve riflessione analitica sul progetto prendendo in considerazione due livelli differenti ma strettamente interconnessi. Da un lato si vuole guardare al progetto nelle sue caratteristiche metodologiche, per quanto riguarda la progettazione di livello macro e micro, dall’altro ci si vuole soffermare su alcuni contenuti e risultati del progetto, letti secondo un’analisi qualitativa.

### ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Older adult education in Italy is a wide and rich world involving many educational fields. From the very beginning, this educational sector has been conceived as a strategy for fostering active participation among the elderly. In the past few years, due to social and demographic changes and the consequently increasing coexistence between generations, older adult education is focusing more and more on increasing active citizenship and intergenerational dialogue and solidarity (Ripamonti, 2009). Many educational contexts for older adults are designed as intergenerational learning environments, where people can meet and share significant living experiences among generations and social groups. Moreover, the promotion of positive intergenerationality (Saraceno, 2008) is a very powerful personal tool for empowerment, especially when facing difficulties. This is the case of the project “Il pozzo della memoria” (The well of memory), designed to foster sustainability through the recovery of environmental memories and participatory social planning (Oltheten 1999) among intergenerational communities, in small villages in the Bologna countryside (Emilia-Romagna, Italy). When this project was set up, a severe earthquake shook and shocked some of the villages involved. As a consequence of this dramatic experience, the project was re-planned to answer the new learning needs of the population. Intergenerational dialogue became an opportunity for teaching and learning resilience (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Burns 1996). Older adults’ memories of the Second World War and post-war reconstruction became a fundamental heritage, an asset for the younger generations and for all the community.

This paper focuses on the analysis of two different but complementary aspects of the project: on one hand, the methodology, micro- and macro-planning, and on the other hand the project contents and results. We intend to describe this unexpected and innovative learning experience.

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## 1. Intergenerationality and education

The basis for an educational approach promoting intergenerational dialogue can be found in all the theories referring to life-span perspective and lifelong learning approach (Luppi, 2010).

The life-span perspective overcame the traditional views of human ages and all the theories that considered life course as a curve shaped like a bell where adulthood was placed at the bottom and childhood and third age at the beginning and at the end of this curve. In this model the most important period of human life is adulthood and any other moment is relevant just in relation to this life step. Childhood is considered as a preparation or a training for adult life and old age is seen as the progressive decline of abilities and possibilities of adult life. Life-span perspective (Baltes, Reese, Lipsitt, 1980) brought on a very different point of view on human life. This approach conceives life-course as a dynamic path, in which life is seen as a discontinuous line.

According to the Lifespan perspective there is not one age period that affects an individual's development more than the others and there is not an optimum or peak age for learning. There are experiences which are especially significant and that may affect the direction of our development, as is the case of challenges or moments of transition. However, one cannot predict the moment in which these experiences will occur nor the impact that they will have on the individual. Life is characterized by life marker events and development tasks, and development is influenced by variables that are different for each person. The entire picture of human development and growth can only be understood in relation to the cultural and social dynamics in which they occur. If life span is seen as cyclical, young and elderly people's experiences and markers events are not necessarily so far from each other. Life is much more influenced by personal or historical events rather than from growing or aging itself.

It is essential for the elderly person to maintain the ability to regenerate over adult years and to express this in new ways such as: communication and transmission of personal experiences, safeguarding of a cultural patrimony that may otherwise fade away. helping in upbringing children and grandchildren.

Elderly education in Italy has become more and more widespread and diversified in the last twenty years. The opportunities of educational experiences for elderly people are growing very fast, both in terms of quantity and variety. All the educational environments involving elderly are characterised by the presence of both the young elderly and the elderly elderly groups. We consider as young elderly (Minguzzi, 2003) those individuals who are still active, who enjoy relatively good health and who can be seen as elderly largely because they are pensioners or grandparents, two roles that have traditionally been associated with old age. The "so-called" elderly elderly, are people aged more than 70-75, who are less active, healthy, and closer to fragility and loss of autonomy. What is still missing in most of these environments is the presence of young people.

Intergenerational educational experiences very often take place in the form of projects involving pupils, teenagers and elderly people. These projects take place in schools and in non-formal educational environments. Even if this latter kind of experience is increasing in number, intergenerational dialogue is still rather unfrequent. The "pilot projects" promoting intergenerational dialogue should become more widespread.

## 2. Sustainability and education

"Il Pozzo della Memoria" ("Well of Memory") is an interesting social project experience based on dialogue and participation, aiming to design bespoke interventions to respond to the needs of stakeholders. The project has been coordinated by the Voluntary Association AUSER based in Bologna (Italy). The project, which was initially planned to enhance the environmental sustaina-

bility and sustainability histories of selected areas in the province of Bologna (Italy), seeking balances in the relationship between man and the environment in the memories of the places and people, was revised following the earthquake which hit the very same areas in spring 2012.

This contribution aims to offer a brief analytical review of the project, considering two different but closely interconnected levels. On one hand, we look at the project methodology, and on the other we offer a qualitative analysis of some of the project contents and results.

The “Il pozzo della memoria” project was designed as an inter-generational educational path to promote sustainability. The concept of sustainability, the founding references of which remain the documents “The limits to growth” (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, Behrens 1972) which opened the debate, and the “Brundtland Report” (WCED 1987) which had an impact on national and international policies, now suffers from a conceptual ambiguity afflicting all the complex meanings applied indiscriminately to real situations. Sustainability offers a systemic review of the man-nature relationship, including some variables which lead to see-saw imbalances between anthropic factors and environmental elements. The economy-ecology-equity triangle, which is characteristic of the concept of sustainability, focuses on a different way of understanding the direct and indirect effects of human choices on the ecosystems. Sustainability also contains conceptual contradictions highlighted by the supporters of deep ecology and de-growth movements (Latouche 2006): the idea that development can be sustainable is clearly an oxymoron, given the finiteness of the planet's resources. However, it is also equally clear that it is impossible to stop development here and now. Sustainability seems to be the possible mediation for refocusing policies and human behaviour with a view to ensuring a greater balance and durability of our impacts on the future generations.

In educating towards sustainability, we have to consider that the change of paradigm is one of the key concepts of sustainability. As Sterling suggests (1996, 2001, 2005), education to sustainability is a highly complex challenge, as it demands a profound change of perspective. Indeed, if the man-environment relationship has become unsustainable, this has happened because we have been educated towards a model of unsustainability. Today, on the contrary, the idea we have of a world of apparent foreseeability and security is replaced by a vision of the world marked by complexity, interconnection, uncertainty and insecurity (Blewitt 2005).

Sustainability challenges our knowledge of ecology and citizenship, economics and society, knowledge that is required for the survival of both the individual and the species (McFarlane and Ogazon 2011).

According to Dale and Newman (2006), the purpose of education to sustainability consists in exploring the reconciliation between critical social, ecological and economic issues. Its flexibility requires that we rethink and move further from our values and convictions (Wade 2008). Sustainability is a process, not a purpose, and requires dynamic, holistic approaches, able to recognise the interests in competition or in conflict, re-establishing reconciliation processes. Sustainable development acts as a meeting point which builds the conceptual capacity of working through an interdisciplinary approach (Cullingford and Blewitt 2004).

### **3. The “Il pozzo della memoria” (the well of memory) project**

The “Il pozzo della memoria” (the well of memory) project was designed to create a cultural, ecological and social environmental enhancement programme, creating links between the mountain areas and plains of the province of Bologna (Italy). The overall objective of the project was to promote an “environmental culture” through the activities of associations and entities working in

different sectors (social, cultural and environmental). These associations and entities consider the knowledge and respect of nature as a determining factor for promoting social integration, community activities, sustainability and new active citizenship.

The project set the following overall objectives:

- To strengthen voluntary work and collaboration among bodies working in the territory;
- To promote a culture of respect for the environment;
- To enhance the local environment and history;
- To transmit the memories of places through inter-generational dialogue.

The first stage of the project involved a phase of research to understand the chosen environmental and cultural heritage and the changes which have taken place over time. These topics went hand in hand with the study of social topics, investigating the features of relations, ties, communities and solidarity in different periods with groups of young people, adults and the elderly. The research aimed to map the various rivers, lakes and canals in the territory, tracing cultural and nature trails to raise awareness of the wealth of little-known environmental and cultural heritage, promoting the use of local natural and historical resources, with a view to respecting nature.

To strengthen the voluntary role within the project, the network of associations and organisations participating in the project all undertook to design, run and network seminars and initiatives on these subjects, involving local schools (with the support of the municipal administrations). Training laboratories were run for (mainly elderly) volunteers, to teach the skills needed to run educational laboratories for young people and children (toy and instrument making, narration of ancient crafts, thematic cultural itineraries, theatre, etc.). At the end of the project a "living map" was produced, including awareness raising events promoting new strategies for fostering local sustainability, with the contribution of volunteers and all the adults and young people involved.

In particular, the project involved children from primary, middle and secondary schools, university students, adults and elderly volunteers.

After the first five months of project implementation, in late May 2012, the territories of Emilia were hit by a series of severe earthquakes in the Po Valley plains (Emilia Romagna, Italy), the strongest of which were on 20 and 27 May. The earthquakes caused 27 victims, serious damage to civil and industrial buildings, canals, as well as historic monuments and buildings. Across a vast area, many of the monuments and places of historic interest partially collapsed or were seriously damaged.

After these tragic events, the project, which covered exactly the areas hit by the earthquake, was redesigned, focusing the efforts of the network on offering support for the affected populations. Whole villages had lost the significant places, times and relationships of their community life, and needed to recreate a collective history, rediscover a common identity and build new relations with the territory.

With this in mind, the original objective of recovering the memory of places of the natural and social environment, to promote a participatory development of our territory, took on a new and urgent focus. The planned map therefore became a map of solidarity, in which each territory used its available resources to offer support to the areas hit by the earthquake. The objective became that of a participatory project in which each local group analysed the existing resources and rethought them with a view to local intergenerational solidarity. In this way, the living map aimed to heal the profound wounds of the physical map, to respond to the authentic needs of the people living in an emergency situation and who had lost their bearings. The project structure did not change, and remained focused on the enhancement of local contexts with a view to sustainability, what changed however was the focus on the areas affected by the earthquake and the inclusion of

the added value of local solidarity.

From a methodological point of view and the project strategies and methods chosen and implemented, "Il pozzo della memoria" is configured as a cooperative or participatory project (Wandersman, Imm, Chinman, & Kaftarian, 2000; Banks, Butcher, Henderson, Robertson, 2003; Warburton 2003, Wiseman, Chinman, Ebener, Hunter, Imm, Wandersman, 2007). Some key elements characterising the structure of the project can be identified, how it was founded and how it was subsequently redesigned "in progress", in order to offer concrete responses to the people involved and reach new recipients, with new and urgent needs.

The first element characterising "Il pozzo della Memoria", both when it was first designed and during its implementation, is the idea of a participatory planning: the approach was based, step by step, on the redefinition of intermediate objectives and strategies, to be achieved through cooperative processes in which the stakeholders of different contexts were called on to offer their own contributions to planning every single project action.

A further characteristic of "Il pozzo della Memoria" was the bottom-up needs analysis, interviewing and listening to the actual recipients and intercepting potential needs in order to define the needs the project should respond to in the most authentic manner possible.

Finally, the project was marked by the identification of needs response strategies and actions based on the enhancement of local resources, in particular the wealth of different voluntary associations.

The participatory nature of the project, the analysis of bottom-up needs, and the response to needs through the enhancement of local networks and resources were characteristic of the project right from the outset, and made it possible to redesign the project when faced with the huge emergency of the earthquake and the new needs which emerged.

The earthquake was a catastrophic event which caused a deep fracture in the territory and in the people. Any event of this kind instils a sense of uncertainty in people, generating destabilisation and fear. Fear can generate annihilation and a sense of impotence which blocks people, preventing them from reacting, but, as Hobbes stated, it can also represent a "mobilising passion", an emotion which drives people and communities to react individually and, above all, collectively. In this sense fear can be transformed into mobilising force, when it generates responsibility towards those who are weaker than ourselves, leading to care, as a condition for a new "being together".

This sense of responsibility towards those in difficulty, towards the more fragile among us, led to the activation of associations, groups and individuals through a bottom-up, virtuous circle, in which the needs analysis was followed by the search for an immediate response to that need, returning to a new analysis and new responses, creating a mosaic of intergenerational solidarity responding to the needs of the wounded territories.

#### **4. Educating to resilience: project results**

During the project, the qualitative research aimed to investigate the problem of personal and collective reactions to the earthquake trauma. The research, based on the analysis of contents, began by focusing on three different types of data:

The personal stories collected by the "Associazione Psicologi per i Popoli" ("Association of Psychologists for the People") during the individual and collective sessions to support the populations affected by the earthquake;

A series of drawings done by children in some of the nursery schools in the province of Modena, during post-trauma support workshops managed by the "Associazione Psicologi per i Popoli";

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Some interviews involving a dozen elderly people attending a day centre in Bologna.

All the material was analysed with a view to the qualitative analysis of its contents, in order to identify recurrent elements and explanatory variables as well as to investigate the wealth of personal experiences.

The key concept identified as the guiding thread connecting the many different stories collected is the concept of resilience.

The term resilience comes from physics and biology and is used in social sciences to describe the ability of individuals to resist the trauma of life without breaking or bending, but managing to maintain and improve their own psychosocial resources (Oliverio Ferraris, 2003, Trabucchi 2007, Di Lauro 2012). Resilience is considered as the ability to handle stressful events, overcome them and continue to evolve, increasing one's own resources, with a consequent positive reorganisation of life (Malaguti, 2005).

Human science has studied resilience from many different viewpoints and using different approaches, remaining coherent with the idea that resilience represents the human ability to tackle, overcome and be strengthened or transformed by the adverse experiences of life (Putton, Fortugno, 2006).

Beyond individual paths and personality traits, from an educational viewpoint the dynamic and evolutionary aspect of resilient behaviour is highlighted, assigning great importance to promoting and developing all the abilities linked to supporting people and their ability for positive management and transformation (Malaguti 2005; Putton, Fortugno 2008).

In this sense the possibilities of the individual, the group and the organisation to develop resilient styles and attitudes is enhanced, and resilience is understood not only as a result or a state, but above all as a path and a process.

From the educational point of view, the systemic dimension of the concept of resilience is enhanced, the ability of the individual and their own system of social relations to tackle sudden change or trauma and overcome the related crises, through a qualitative change in which not only personal well-being but the social cohesion of the group is maintained. Social contexts therefore play an important role in fostering resilience in people and creating the protective contexts and tools required to tackle trauma (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Many studies have attempted to describe the individual skills that make people more capable of resilience (Putton & Fortugno, 2006), Burns (1996) sums these up into four macro areas relating to as many dimensions: autonomy, problem solving skills, social skills, resolutions for the future.

The area of autonomy includes elements such as self-esteem, the sense of self-efficacy, the attribution of internal causal links, i.e. the sense of responsibility for the events which have positive effects on planning and action; autonomy and independence in the choice of one's own values and objectives, motivation for seeking internal and external stimulus for acting, hopefulness, i.e. the tendency to think that even unforeseeable events can bring innovation and positive effects.

The problem solving area includes the following competences referring to resilience: critical or reflective thought, creativity and planning skills. The social skills include responsibility and participation in the referred social context, flexibility and dialogue/negotiation skills, empathy and the ability to offer and receive social support, communication and a sense of humour.

In the area Burns (1996) defined as "resolutions for the future" resilience skills include the clarity of objectives to be reached, the ability to achieve good results through commitment, motivation to carry through commitments, tenacity, hope, understood as trust in the future, enthusiasm and consistency between choice and actions.

Within the field of positive psychology, the elements of resilience are identified as happiness

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(Buss, 2000), subjective well-being (Diener, 2000), optimism (Peterson, 2000), faith (Myers, 2000), self-determination (Ryan, 2000), wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) and creativity (Simonton, 2000).

Resilient people are optimists and tend to interpret negative events as momentary or in any case circumscribed; they feel that they have a margin of control over their own lives and the environment that surrounds them, and tend to see change as a challenge and an opportunity, rather than a threat; faced with defeat and frustration, they are in any case able to not lose hope (Trabucchi 2007).

The data collected highlighted several occurrences of resilient actions, behaviour or attitudes. Below we analyse some elements linked to the concept of resilience which were found in the collected data.

Resilience was found to be a collective phenomenon: in many institutional, public and personal documents, elements emerged which refer to the collective imagination of the Emilia region as a resilient place; a place whose inhabitants are able to react with strength and determination even to catastrophic events like an earthquake. These visions emerge from newspaper articles, statements made by the local authorities as well as in personal stories. This vision of the group creates a positive "Pygmalion effect" in the people involved, it generates hope at a time when each person chooses how to tell their own history and plan their own future.

Many stories of personal resilience come from the ability of individuals to strive to seek meaning to give to the events. The search for meaning makes external events even more subject to human control, not in their essence but rather in the meaning they hold for each of us. While it is true that we cannot change an external event, it is equally true that we can choose the interpretation to give to the event and how to relate to it as a consequence. The people who told their own stories, through written prose, voice or drawings, demonstrated numerous strategies of resilience and the ability to tackle the traumatic event. Generally, in the part of the population known as the "late elderly", an even greater attitude of resilience was recorded compared to that of young people and adults.

To better understand this fact, we organised interviews with the elderly people attending a day centre in the city of Bologna. These people belonged to the same age bracket, i.e. the "late elderly", but who were affected in a much less traumatic way by the earthquake, as they were all residents in the city of Bologna, which suffered the effects of the earthquake far less seriously. The comparison between the two groups showed how the over-80s have what we may define as a "memory of resilience" with a background of personal and collective experiences linked to the ability to tackle difficult times and traumatic events. The main experiences of resilience of these elderly people lie in the memories of the Second World War and their memories linked to living conditions in the post-war period. Having faced tragic events or situations of hardship, and conserving the memory of the strategies adopted to cope with them, has allowed them to bear and overcome pains and difficulties which make the elderly more resilient. At the same time, they hold the memory of resilience to be transmitted to the new generations.

In the personal stories of the elderly people living in the areas hit by the earthquake, key paths of individual resilience were identified that began with responsibility and care, as described above in the analysis of collective resilience. In this case the individuals demonstrated great resilience as they chose to focus away from the fear and concentrate their energies on care, assistance and even simple worry for others, putting other people before themselves. Worry over relatives, friends, children or grandchildren shifted the attention of many elderly people from fear for themselves,

to activation of resources to help and support their significant others.

Another tool of resilience underlined by the persons involved in the project was the ability to upturn the situation of personal experience, assigning other meanings to the traumatic event they had suffered. Many young people, adults and elderly people underlined how the earthquake allowed them to spend time with neighbours and other people in their neighbourhood or village, rediscovering the sense of community.

Many people told of their experience and the strategies they adopted to tackle the traumatic events underlining the importance of the self-image that each of us builds for themselves. Several of the elderly people interviewed described their own self-image as resilient, strong, able to make it through. These images of resilience are built over the years, right from childhood, through the voices of our significant people, that each of us continues to carry within: "My father used to say, "hold on, be strong", an elderly man who considered himself to be a strong person told.

Resilience is something that is also built and strengthened collectively. The people and intergenerational groups who told us about their own experiences particularly underlined the importance of finding or inventing and sharing strategies for resilience, outwardly referring to and telling of their own fear in order to exorcise it and play it down, alone or, even better, together.

All these experiences and paths of resilience - generational and intergenerational, personal and collective, constructed and co-constructed - lead us back to the dimension of hope, as a possibility to look beyond, when the perception of things negative, of hardships, is accompanied by the certainty that, sooner or later, they will end (Trabucchi, 2011). The stories told, illustrated, read and analysed tell us that hope is not in-born, it is transmitted, taught and learned. Hope is built and rebuilt through dialogue, particularly authentic intergenerational dialogue between the elderly, those bearers of memories of resilience and the young people who can reinvent that same resilience in order to project it into the future.

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