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Adolescents on the move: the application of an integrated model for documentation and evaluation of "Back Into the Wild" Adventure Education project aimed at promoting psychophysical and relational well-being

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Adolescents on the move: the application of an integrated model for documentation and evaluation of "Back Into the Wild" Adventure Education project aimed at promoting psychophysical and relational well-being[1]

This paper presents a new integrated model for documentation and evaluation tested in 2021 on Back Into the Wild project, an Adventure Education project by Equilibero Association (Padova-Treviso, Italy). The project proposes educational walks to groups of at-risk adolescents to promote their psychophysical and relational well-being.

Due to the paucity of evaluation methods focused on grasping the process dimension of nature-based projects, the research team (CEFEO Research Centre, University of Bologna) chose to construct a new model of documentation and evaluation through a participatory bottom-up process involving practitioners.

In addition to outlining the main characteristics of Adventure Education in socio-educational projects in Italy and the peculiarities of BIW project, this paper describes the co-constructed integrated documentation and evaluation model in detail.

The first application highlighted the usefulness of the multi-perspective view provided by this tool, allowing for a reflection on how the adventurous project impacted on participants' psychophysical and relational well-being.

Keywords: adventure education; adolescents; evaluation; documentation

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[1] This paper is the result of a collective work, a collaboration between researchers and practitioners. In particular: A. Gigli wrote sections 1 and 7; G. Melotti wrote sections 5 and 6; C. Borelli wrote sections 2 and 4, and took care of the translation into English; M. Galiazzo, N. Segato and G. Finocchiaro wrote section 3 and conducted the project that is the subject of this research.

This paper is the result of a collaboration between practitioners and researchers[2] and it presents the construction and the first application of a new integrated model of documentation and evaluation (IMDE) used for the first time in 2021 in the project called "Back Into the Wild" (BIW) promoted by the Equilibero Association[3] (from Padova-Treviso, Italy). BIW is an Adventure Education (AE) project that consists of educational walks with groups of at-risk adolescents living in residential communities for minors, the aim of which is to promote the participants' psychophysical and relational well-being through self-questioning and self-discovery.

1 Adventure Education in socio-educational projects with at-risk adolescents in Italy: characteristics, theoretical frames and educational methods

AE can be defined as a series of educational practices that use natural environments as educational partners to stimulate "experiences of growth, development, learning, prevention addressed to individuals, groups or communities, [...] [aimed at] affecting the existential state of subjects by provoking intersubjective integration, learning social skills, group dynamics, balanced attitudes towards risk, health education and positive lifestyles" (Gigli et al., 2020, p. 84).

In the Italian context, AE projects have the peculiarity of taking place in the socio-educational area. They are generally initiatives that are integrated in broad programmes in which the aim is to combat/prevent adolescent distress, promote mental health, psycho-physical wellbeing, social skills, as well as adaptive attitudes and

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[2] CEFEO Research Centre on Experiential and Outdoor Education and Training of the Department of Educational Sciences of the University of Bologna https://centri.unibo.it/cefeo/it/cefeo-international

[3] www.equilibero.org

behaviours to face life's challenges (Agostini & Minelli, 2018; Caena, 2019). These projects are usually part of wider programmes in extracurricular socio-educational services[4] and employ professional educators[5].

The budgets for the implementation of these projects are allocated by the regional administrations, with considerable inhomogeneity at the national level. We have regions where these projects have been widespread since the 1980s with continuity and others where they have been developing for less time and in a discontinuous manner (Melotti et al., 2020).

For this type of project, in the context referred to in this work, it is considered more appropriate to use the term Adventure Education, in order to avoid improperly calling them Adventure Therapy or Wilderness Therapy. The coordinates and aims of specifically therapeutic interventions differ from educational ones, as they are characterised by rehabilitative methodological approaches aimed at subjects suffering from pathologies or disabilities, and must be carried out by professionals with specific training in the therapeutic field (Crisp, 1996; Gass, 1993; Gigli, 2020; Russel, 2001).

In AE, projects aim to promote well-being using a biopsychosocial approach to distress (Dodge & Zelli, 2000; Engel, 1977; World Health Organization, 2001) and a systemic approach.

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[4] Socio-educational services in Italy consist of: territorial educational groups, residential communities for minors, street education, community development, prevention of juvenile distress, harm reduction, youth centres, leisure time proposals, restorative justice.

[5] We choose to use the term "educator" because it is the closest to the Italian term "educatore". However, this term does not refer to a teacher, but to the professional figure present in Italy defined as "social and cultural educator". To learn more about the characteristics of this profession, you can consult the educational objectives of the degree course that prepares for this profession: https://corsi.unibo.it/1cycle/SocialCulturalEducation-Bologna

AE is typically structured as a “breakaway” activity that exposes subjects to meaningful experiences in unusual environments. This process of detachment from everyday spaces, time and relationships is aimed at stimulating them to understand their own personal weaknesses, strengths and resources (Nadler, 1993; Taniguchi & Freeman, 2004). The educational hypothesis and the central goals of AE are based on the concepts of empowerment (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Leroux, 2019) and self efficacy (Bandura, 1997). AE experiences allow the individual to mobilise their cognitive, emotional and behavioural resources and to understand the best strategies to produce the change required to cope with new situations.

Using risk and challenge as an educational device (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993; Galiazzo, 2012; Gigli, 2018; Gill, 2007), the explicit aims of such proposals are: to promote psychological resilience (Neill & Dias, 2001), facilitate inter- and intrapersonal interaction (Meyer & Wenger, 1998; Sheard & Golby, 2006) and the development of a productive coping repertoire.

> “AE experiences, moreover, have the potential to connect the emotional/cognitive/instrumental/relational components and reintegrate the mind-body dualism, re-evaluating the materiality of educational action” (Gigli, 2018, p. 125).

Another substantial aspect of AE is that of promoting an ecological and systemic vision to foster the development of Green Competences (Bianchi et al., 2022). Feeling connected with nature, moreover, can stimulate awareness of interpersonal connection (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Roczen, 2011) and more sustainable behaviour that respects the environment and other people. Furthermore, staying in nature is proved to promote well-being, as confirmed by recent research (Puhakka & Hakoköngäs, 2023).

2 Literature review on the evaluation of nature-based and AE projects

An analysis of the literature reveals that the currently most widespread types of evaluation in the field consist of the creation or adaptation of mainly quantitative tools (usually tests or satisfaction questionnaires), which investigate the effects of AE projects by monitoring the pre- and post-situation.

In Italy, for example, projective tests, assessment tests or scales, diagnostic instruments, the ICF-addictions and other psychological scales or tests have been used. These tools were usually validated for the indoor context and used (with or without) in the outdoor context (Cossu et al., 2016; Galiazzo, 2018; Magnaguagno et al., 2010; Melotti & Cani, 2018; Melotti et al., 2020; Pasqualotto, 2016).

Internationally, several specific instruments have also been validated to assess educational and therapeutic experiences in nature, including, for example, the ATES Scale (Russel & Gillis, 2017) and the LEQ Questionnaire (Neill, 2008), and others to assess connection to nature (Salazar et al., 2020).

These predominantly black-box evaluative methods, while having the merit of having affirmed the effectiveness of educational proposals in nature - as highlighted by numerous international reviews in recent decades (Bowen & Neill, 2013; Hattie et al., 1997; Rickinson et al., 2004) - are nevertheless insufficient to grasp the multiple facets that characterise the complexity of these experiences: “there is still much to be learned about how and why programmes work or not” (Rickinson et al., 2004, p. 56).

It is, therefore, essential to also analyse processes, understood both as “contributing factors” (Cooley, 2015, p. 38) and as a complex set of the various events, experiences and relationships that take place throughout the activities. In order to improve and deepen the understanding of processes, as well as of outcomes, two steps are necessary. The first concerns the understanding of the project framework, assumptions and methodologies; the second, as argued by several authors (Cooley,

2015; Davidson, 2001; Hodgson & Berry, 2011; Rickinson et al., 2004), is the exploration of the process variables that influence the effects.

In the direction of a process-oriented and context-specific evaluation, a theory-driven evaluation approach is particularly interesting: “The purpose of theory-driven evaluation is not only to assess whether an intervention works or does not work, but also how and why it does so” (Chen, 2012, p. 17). The construction of the evaluation framework, therefore, must be guided first and foremost by the “programme theory” (Chen, 2012), understood as the set of implicit and explicit values and ideas that guide the actions of those conducting the project towards the achievement of its objectives. In this way, in fact, it is possible to observe not only the effects - as is the case in black-box evaluation approaches - but also the hows and whys that guide the processes, within contexts that, as pointed out, are particularly complex.

Given the complex and multifaceted nature of AE projects, which make it altogether “more than the sum of its parts” (Neill, 2008, p. 41), the integrated use of different methods and instruments seems to be necessary in order to analyse different aspects and take multiple needs into account simultaneously. The “Who?”, “What?”, “Why?” and “For whom?” usually require different “Hows”; that is, the different and equally important purposes of evaluation oblige the use of different methods and instruments.

Documentation, too, can be a particularly valuable tool for the evaluation of AE projects, as it makes it possible to understand and reconstruct the effects, but starting from the trace of the processes collected *in itinere*: documentation, in fact, “makes it possible to give narrative visibility - through the use of a plurality of languages (images, videos, texts) - of what is happening” (Antonietti, 2022, p. 100).

The above considerations guided the construction of the IMDE, which will be described in the fourth section.

3 Description of the Back Into The Wild (BIW) project: educational walks with groups of adolescents at risk

Back Into The Wild (BIW) project[6] managed by Equilibero Association[7] (Padova-Treviso, Italy) consists of an itinerant walk in mountain areas (mainly the Alps) for several days and in groups (10 participants maximum) with minors from therapeutic or educational residential communities, juvenile prisons, territorial socio-educational services, or youth centres. The goals of the project are related to the promotion of well-being in the participants.

The history of the project starts in 2015 and counts six experiences: one per year until 2022; a total of 44 minors were involved, 94% of which were male.

3.1 Aims of BIW project

The main aims of the project are:

- To educate or re-educate the relationship between self and environment (both natural and social) by creating a setting in which the adolescent can "play with his power between strength and limit, between feeling and thinking" (Galiazzo, 2018, p. 202): the game of "losing oneself in order to find oneself again"

[6] BIW project was conceived by M. Galiazzo and A. De Col in 2015.

[7] Equilibero Association is a non-profit organization, which proposes Adventure Education programs to both public and private organizations working with marginalized people. Equilibero Association might be funded by these organizations themselves and/or might apply for European or national types of funding devoted to social issues.

(Galiazzo, 2018; Michieli, 2015). The bewilderment and disorientation proposed by activities in low-anthropized natural environments take on pedagogical value. In the walk, the metaphor of the "return journey from the lost" (*nostos*) is used: like Ulysses, the group randomly chooses a point on the map from which to depart, as far as possible "into the wild", in order to construct and act out a return (Galiazzo, 2018; Recalcati, 2013).

- Stimulating reflexivity, listening and problem solving: while walking in the mountains, the dimension of risk, the unexpected and problem solving stimulate the need to place oneself in the "here and now" and the willingness to listen to the others and to oneself, as well as to trust in one's personal capability to cope in different situations (Galiazzo, 2018; Pietropolli Charmet, 2016).
- Producing secondary socialisation in an experience of breakaway from the ordinary. The setting of intensive sharing of the adventure in the group is used to bring to life an extra-ordinary dimension. The temporary breakaway with the ordinary, everyday context, the exit from familiar or putative safe systems (e.g. residential communities for minors) can deconstruct certain automatisms and provoke changes in the direction of the construction of a new everyday life inter-subjectively constructed during the experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Galiazzo, 2017).
- Activating reflexivity and memory. As the clinical literature indicates (Pani et al., 2009), adolescents have difficulty in verbally reframing, constructing memory of experiences and tend to avoid moments of meta-reflection in groups. In addition, poor emotional literacy (even to the point of alexithymia) and the overbearing externalisation of acting out are combined with difficult life paths,

traumatic histories and acted-out violence that negatively interfere with the acquisition of life skills (Sala et al. 2020).

The aforementioned tendencies of the participants stimulated the search for a tool that could facilitate the activation of reflexivity and memory and the verbalisation of emotions, identifying it in the strategic use of photography[8] (see also Paragraph 5), which is an integral part of the project both in the walking phase and in the post-experience meeting[9].

3.2 Methodology of BIW project

The educational approach to managing the group and its dynamics is geared towards stimulating personal empowerment and problem solving.

Because of the involvement of adolescents living in residential communities, the project is planned and conducted by a network of educational and care services[10] composed of Equilibero educators team, the educational points of reference of each participant (e.g. the educators of the residential communities), parents or foster carers,

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[8] The use of photos for educational purposes (example: portrait photo technique) also stems from the training of some of us in "psycho-corporeal phototherapy" (Musacchi, 2016; Weiser, 2004).

[9] The 2022 BIW Girls experience, with female adolescent participants (who were not in the care of socio-educational services), showed a greater predisposition to reflection/verbalisation in this target group. Given these characteristics, with the group of girls other modes of documentation were also adopted: the tools of "the logbook" and the co-constructed video-clip, correlated with a fairy-tale text created using the Tarot Cards. For more details: https://vimeo.com/712531678?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=142013056

[10] Third parties involved in the 2021 project: Olivotti Educational Residential Community (Riese Pio X, Treviso and Mira, Venice, www.olivotti.org) and Lunghi Cammini Association (Venice, www.lunghicammini.wordpress.com).

and social services (social workers, therapists, and/or other professionals who take care of the teenager).

Equilibero team is composed of two educators[11] who participated in all phases of the project and walk with the group, and one coordinator, who is always available by telephone, as logistical support during the experience, and intervenes in the most delicate decisions such as, for example, conflict situations or eventual removal for serious reasons. The coordinator also manages communication between the walking group and the other figures involved in the network.

The steps of the project ideally retrace the stages of initiatory games (Turner, 1986), developing what Van Gennep (1981) wrote about rites of passage: separation, liminal (or immersive), reintegration. Inspired by this process, the realisation of the project takes place in three phases:

(1) Preparation - separation phase

An initial meeting is organised where Equilibero educators present the project to the educational points of reference of the participants. During a second meeting, the project is presented to the adolescents, who meet for the first time the educators who are going to walk with them. An evening meeting is organised to watch the film “Into the Wild” (Penn, 2007) and then, together with the teenagers, a random point is chosen on a topographical map. This is going to be the starting point for the walk, and from that point the group will be returning home after walking across mountains and forests, through an itinerary in multiple steps organized by the educational team. During this

[11] The educators of the project are trained and experienced professionals from both an educational and technical point of view; however an Alpine Guide was involved for the via ferrata, as required by Italian regulations.

meeting, information is provided on the necessary materials and other practical requirements.

Each participant is asked to write a motivational letter of a few lines in which they describe all their expectations for the walk. The preliminary questionnaire is then administered individually to each minor (PRE-walk participant questionnaire) and a Walk Pact is written containing the commitments, expectations and motivations of each person. The pact is useful for drawing up clear agreements to be referred to in the event of difficulties, conflicts and possible departures that may occur during the experience. The pact is then approved by all those involved (Equilibero team, minors, parents, reference educational figures, social services, etc.) in a special meeting.

(2) Immersive experience - liminal phase

A means of transport accompanies the group from the residential community to the starting point of the walk and the adventure begins. The days are characterised mostly by walking: an average of 4-5 hours a day, along paths immersed in wild nature, carrying a rucksack containing everything necessary (equipment and provisions) for the entire week and for the various overnight stays (in shelters, bivouacs, and tents).

A specific day of the walk is left to be led entirely by the young participants. The night before, the educators explain the basics of orientation, and the following day, with co-operative work, the teenagers are to lead the whole group to their destination, becoming guides for a day. The educators become participating observers, letting them experience mistakes and misunderstandings (intervening only in the event of danger). It is a valuable opportunity to gain a different view of many group dynamics: power relations, the emergence of roles, the ability to cooperate.

Every evening a circle time is set up to stimulate reflection, synthesis, internalisation, re-elaboration, verbalisation of what was experienced during the day and

also to discuss together the programme of the following day on a technical-organisational level, as the participants are involved in planning. For the educators, this is the moment when they have to fill in the DURING-walk Educators Questionnaire, based on their observations of the behaviour of each participant.

(3) Return – reintegration phase

After a week, the adventure comes to an end, but before returning to the residential community, a final moment is carved out to close the group experience. On the return journey, the POST-walk Questionnaire is administered to each participant and educator.

Once they have returned, it is important to create a space for decompression and reflection on the experience. In the following weeks, a final meeting is held to reunite the participants and re-elaborate the adventure through the construction of a poster with photos. Participants play with the images by cutting them, moving them, adding words and phrases, thus mentally and emotionally retracing the entire journey. For the educators, it is an opportunity to observe how the adolescents intervene, comment and relive the episodes.

At the conclusion of the experience, using the tools discussed in this article, Equilibero team produces a Final Individual Report (FIR) on each participant to be delivered to those who commissioned the project.

Over the years, Equilibero educators have increasingly felt the need to evaluate BIW project for multiple reasons: to give a feedback to the services that commission the project; to document the activities carried out; to collect data in order to show the value and the educational effectiveness of these walks with adolescents; to evaluate the suitability of the participants to possibly take part in longer individual walks. The IMDE (described below and used since 2021) is characterised by the integration of different tools and has attempted to respond to the above-mentioned reasons.

4 The process of constructing the Integrated Model of Documentation and Evaluation (IMDE) for BIW project

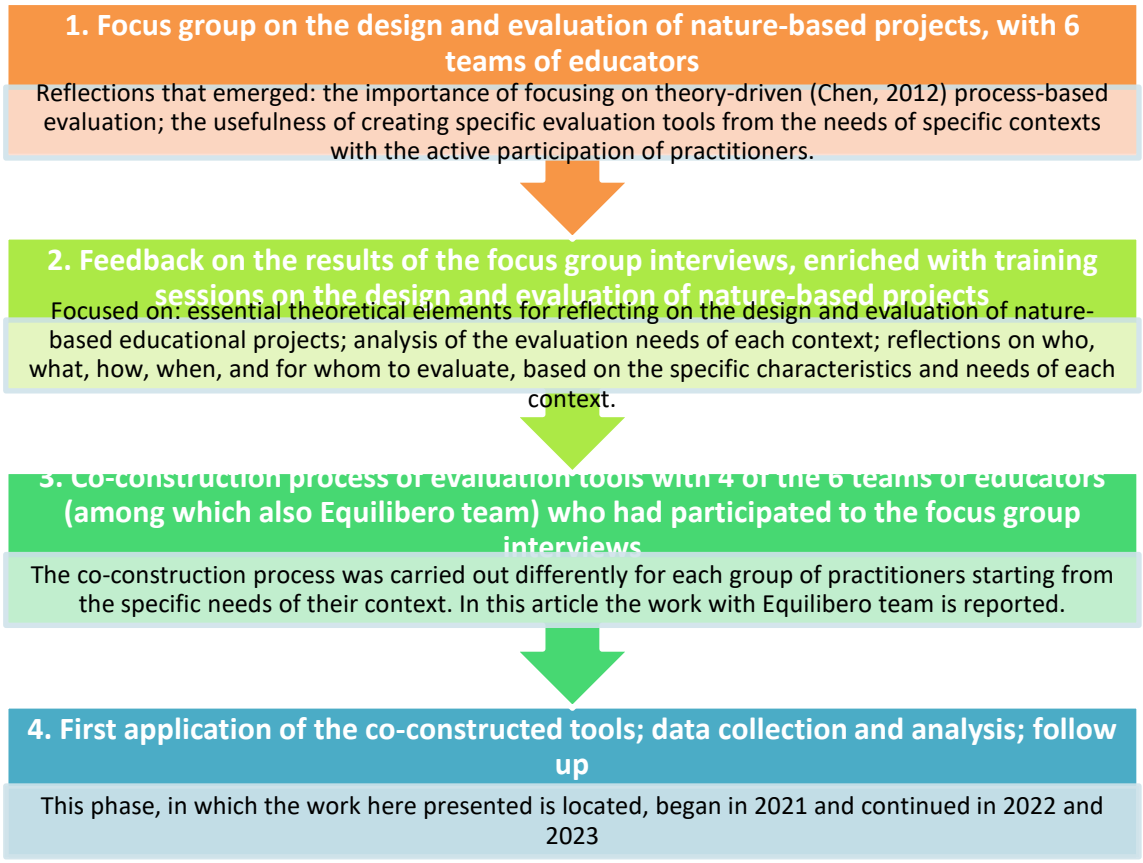
The work presented here is part of a larger research project on the evaluation of nature-based experiential educational projects, resulting from a collaboration between researchers[12] and practitioners[13] who are members of CEFEO Research Centre. The research consists of a bottom-up participatory process (Bradbury, 2015; Le Poultier, 1990), as it was conceived as the best way to overcome the limits to black-box approaches (stated in Section 2). From this process, described in the outline below (Figure 1), the need emerged to develop more effective methods and tools for measurement and evaluation, both to monitor and improve educational work, and to favour the recognition and valorisation of the projects in this field.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the characteristics and themes that emerged in the various stages of the process in which Equilibero Association was involved with the BIW project, starting with exploratory focus groups on the evaluation and design of nature-based projects and ending up with the application of the bottom-up constructed tools:

FIGURE 1

[12] A. Gigli, G. Melotti and C. Borelli

[13] Associazione Equilibero (Treviso-Padova); Cooperativa Sociale La Carovana (Bologna); Cooperativa Sociale Csapsa2 (Bologna); Cooperativa Sociale Centofiori (Rimini).



Going into the specifics of the third phase (see Figure 1), the choice of co-constructing the tools with a participative, bottom-up process, rather than using existing tools, is motivated by several reasons:

- The will to search for real utility and coherence with the context and to build the tool (or set of tools) tailored to each project, in order to capture its specific characteristics and needs. Through this approach the researchers intend to work towards an ecological validity (Brofernbrenner, 1977; Scheidt, 1981) by connecting scientific rigor and social relevance;
- The intention to work with the contribution of practitioners in order to increase the probability that they will perceive the meaning of the tools more deeply, understand its usefulness and be able to use it (Bastianoni & Zullo, 2012; Le Poultier & Guingouain, 1996).

- The will to use the heuristic potential of evaluation (Infantino, 2002) to promote exchange between practitioners in order to make them self-monitor their activities and produce shared changes in educational practices through the dissemination of best practices.

During the co-construction process, special consideration was given to a number of important aspects, including consistency with the objectives, clarity of the items, speed and ease of use, and sustainability for the educators (in terms of time and energy required for data collection and analysis).

Inspired by dimensions of Ates Therapy Experience Scale (ATES Scale) (Russel & Gillis, 2017) - (a) “Being in nature”: self-portrait in an extraordinary, nature-based context, (b) “Adventure activities”: how one deals with the challenges that activities in nature entail, (c) “Peer relationship”, (d) “Leader relationship”, (e) “Activity reflection”: the ability to reflect on the activities - Equilibero practitioners reflected also on the need to develop a data collection system that would be able to involve both educators and participants, favouring the intersection of their perspectives; educators observe the participants, but the participants also reflect on themselves and their fellow adventurers based on those 5 dimensions.

In addition, it was planned to use certain educational activities and proposals (including, for example, photography and group reflection from a stimulus image) also as forms of documentation and monitoring of the project.

Sharing with the researchers these reflections issued by the educators, the process of co-construction of the evaluation and documentation framework actually began, the features of which will be explored more in detail in the next section.

5 Description of the integrated model for documentation and evaluation (IMDE) applied to BIW 2021

The first use of IMDE took place in BIW project in 2021, the main features of which are outlined below:

- Participants: 4 adolescents from two different residential communities for minors in the area around Venice.
- Practitioners: 2 BIW educators and 1 volunteer walking with the adolescents; 1 coordinator.
- Period: 30 August - 3 September 2021.
- Route: from Sesto to Calalzo di Cadore, in the heart of the Cadore Dolomites (province of Belluno, Italy). Special features of the route: crossing a via ferrata; a lot of altitude difference.
- Service who commissioned the project: Associazione Lunghi Cammini (VE).
- Other peculiarities: Equilibero Association strictly required the residential communities to only send teenagers willing to participate.

The IMDE is a quali-quantitative system composed of multiple tools:

- 3 different questionnaires: the Participant Questionnaire in the PRE- and POST-walk versions; the DURING-walk and POST-walk Educator Questionnaires;
- Photographic documentation (through the “Portrait Photo” technique);
- Group reflection from a stimulus image.

FIGURE 2

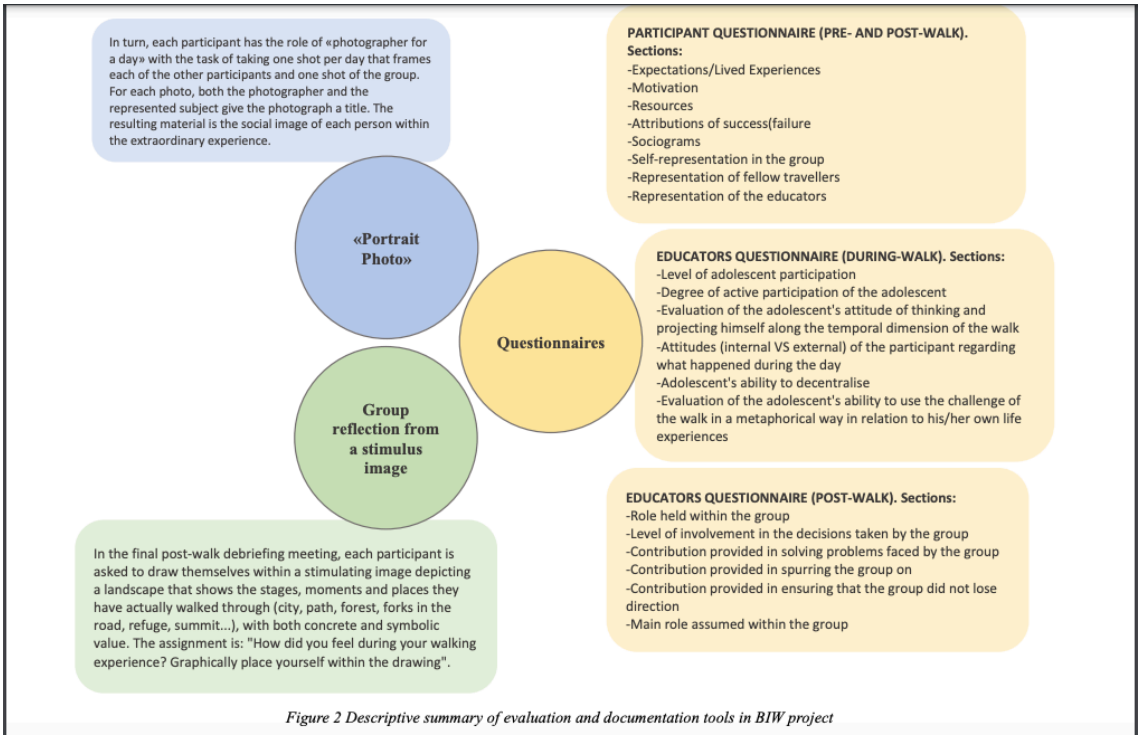


Figure 2 Descriptive summary of evaluation and documentation tools in BIW project

5.1 Questionnaires

Through the use of a "walking tablet" brought by the educators specifically for the IMDE purposes, the questionnaires were administered using Google Forms, to make the filling in more appealing for the teenagers, and to simplify data collection and analysis for the educators.

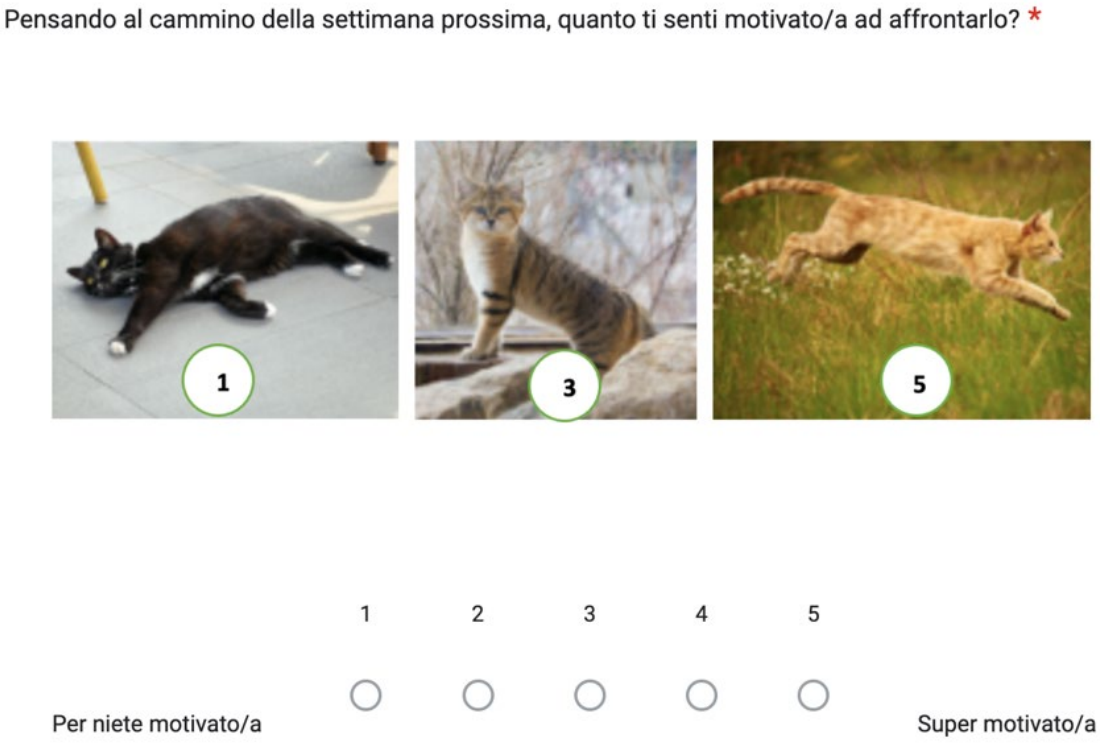
PRE- and POST-walk Participants Questionnaire

This questionnaire was administered before and after the experience. The questions in the two versions are the same in content, but were worded slightly differently according to whether the experience was imagined/presented beforehand (in the PRE- version) or whether it was actually experienced (in the POST- version). For saving space, we only present the PRE- version here.

In order to be able to associate the PRE-walk questionnaire for each participant with its corresponding POST-walk, each adolescent was asked to indicate a fictitious nickname, as well as their gender and age (no sensitive data were asked).

Most of the questions were accompanied by eye-catching images to facilitate and encourage the adolescents participation in the compilation, as well as to clarify certain terms and concepts, as shown in Figure 3:

FIGURE 3



The questionnaire is divided into five sections:

(1) Expectations/Lived experiences, Motivation, Resources and Attributions of Success/Failure;

(2) Sociograms;

(3) Self-representation in the group;

(4) Representation of the fellow travellers;

(5) Representation of the educators.

(1) Expectations/Lived experiences, Motivation, Resources and Attributions of Success/Failure. In this first part, through three open-ended questions, participants were

asked to indicate their expectations on the experience ('What do you expect from this adventure?'), their expectations regarding the challenges to be faced along the way ('What challenges do you expect to face along the way?') and their expectations of the group ('The group will be...?').

The participants were then asked: 'Thinking about the walk, how much do you feel able to cope with it? Thinking about the walk, how much energy do you feel you can expend?' and 'Thinking about the walk, how motivated do you feel to tackle it?'. The answers to these 3 questions were collected on a 5-point scale (1='Not at all'; 5= 'Very much') accompanied by evocative images (e.g. the question on the amount of energy possessed was associated with 5 different representations of an electric battery, from totally empty to fully charged).

Next, through two open-ended questions, participants were asked to indicate what resources they possessed and what they lacked in order to cope with the journey. This theme was then deepened with three questions. The first asked 'Where do you think you can find these missing resources?' and participants had to indicate on a 5-point scale (1='Not at all'; 5='Very much') how much 5 different targets ('Myself', 'The fellow travellers', 'The educators', 'The group' and 'The environment') could be a resource.

Finally, two questions were asked to detect the participants' attributions regarding the success or failure of the walk. The response mode involved choosing one target from a list of potential causes of success or failure: no one, myself, the companions, educators, the group, the environment/nature or "other" (asking in this case to specify).

(2) Sociograms. In order to obtain two different sociograms aimed at reconstructing the communication network and that relating to perceived support in the event of difficulty,

the adolescents were asked to answer the following questions: ‘Thinking of your companions (including the educators), how much would you like to talk to each of them?’; ‘Thinking of your companions (including educators), in the event of difficulty, how much do you imagine you will be helped by each of them?’ (scale 1 to 5: 1=‘Not at all’; 5=‘Very much’, to refer to each of the companions).

(3) Self-representation in the group. The following questions investigated elements such as self-image, role played and level of involvement and participation within the group: ‘How do you see yourself in the group?’ (open answer); ‘Thinking about yourself in the group, which character do you think best reflects you?’ (Participants had to choose only one of the following roles: ‘Comedian, Nuisance, Wise, Altruist, Fearful, Scaremonger, Slob, Persecuted, Dragger, Bully’); ‘Thinking about yourself in this adventure with your companions, how do you see yourself in the group?’ (5-point scale. 1=‘Victim’; 3=‘Collaborator’; 5=‘Commander’, with evocative images); ‘Thinking of yourself in this adventure with your companions, how do you imagine yourself when faced with decisions to be made?’ (5-point scale: 1=‘I let others decide’; 3=‘I decide with others’; 5=‘I decide for everyone, associated with evocative images’); ‘When facing with a problem of the group...’ (5-point scale: 1=‘I try not to get involved’; 3=‘I undertake to solve the problem by confronting myself’; 5=‘I have all the solutions, with evocative images’); ‘For the energies of the group, you will be...’ (5-point scale; 1=‘Shared’; 5=‘Energy drink’); ‘For orientation you will be...’ (5-point scale: 1=‘Lost with others’; 5=‘Always with navigator or map in hand’).

(4) Representation of the fellow travellers. Referring to each of the fellow travellers, participants were asked to answer the same questions posed in the section self-representation in the group, rephrased in the third person.

(5) Representation of the educators. Participants were asked six questions on a 5-point scale (1='Not at all'; 5='Very much') to indicate how helpful each educator was perceived to be: helpful; able to listen; an obstacle; helpful in understanding how to deal with situations; helpful in general; restricting the participant's freedom.

Finally, three open-ended questions were asked to describe each of the two educators and the project coordinator.

DURING-walk Educators Questionnaire

After each day of walking, after the group reflection among the educators and the adolescents, the educators filled out an evaluation questionnaire for each teenager to collect their personal observations on:

- date, and name of the adolescent;
- the adolescent's level of participation, through the question: 'Did he actively participate?' with answers on a 4-point scale (from 1='No, he did not pay attention and remained isolated' to 4='Yes, he actively participated with interventions');
- the degree of the adolescent's active participation through communicative interventions, through an open question ('How many times did he actively intervene?') and a 5-point scale question ('How much time did he take with his interventions?') (1='Very little'; 5='Very much');
- the adolescent's ability to think and project himself along the temporal dimension of the journey, through the following three questions: 'How much does he remember of the day (past)?' and 'Does he make proposals for the following days (future)?' (4-point scale: 1='Not at all'; 4='Very much'; with the possibility of also indicating 'Not assessable');

- the adolescent's attributions (internal VS external) regarding what happened during the day, through the question: 'To whom does he attribute the responsibility for what happens?' (5-point scale: 1='Only to oneself' to 2='Only to others');
- the adolescent's ability to decentralise, through the question 'How does he interpret the events of the day?' (5-point scale: 1='In an unrealistic and subjective way, considering only oneself'; 5='In a realistic and objective way, also considering others');
- the adolescent's ability to use the challenge of the walk in a metaphorical way in relation to his or her own life experiences through an open question ('To which experiences in your life do you connect this adventure?') and a 5-point scale question ('Do you make connections between what happened today and other episodes in your life?') (1='Very little'; 5='Very much');
- a final field to note any further relevant observations.

POST-walk Educators' Questionnaire

At the end of the walk, the educators all together completed an overall evaluation questionnaire of the experience for each participant aimed at collecting the following information:

- date, and name of the adolescent;
- the status held within the group, through the question 'How did you behave in the group (power)?' (5-point scale: 1='Victim'; 3='Collaborator'; 5='Commander');

- the level of involvement in the decisions taken by the group, with the question ‘How did he act in the group (decision)?’ (5-point scale: 1=‘He lets others decide’; 3=‘He decides with others’; 5=‘He decides for everyone’);
- the contribution provided in solving the problems the group faced, through the question ‘How did he behave in the group (problem solver)?’ (5-point scale: 1=‘Did not get involved’; 5=‘Always had all the solutions without considering others’);
- the contribution provided in spurring on the group, with the question ‘For the group’s energies, he was...’ (5-point scale: 1=‘Calm’; 5=‘Energy drink’);
- the contribution provided to ensuring that the group did not lose its orientation, through the question ‘For the group’s orientation, he was...’ (5-point scale: 1=‘Lost with others’; 5=‘Compass’);
- the main role assumed within the group by selecting a single term from the following: ‘Comedian, Nuisance, Wise, Altruist, Fearful, Scaremonger, Slob, Persecuted, Dragger, Bully’;
- A final field to note any further relevant observations.

5.2 Photographic documentation using the “Portrait Photo” technique

In addition to facilitating the activation of reflexivity and memory and the verbalisation of the emotional experiences of the young participants (see Paragraph 3), the photographic documentation was also used with an evaluative purpose.

The “Portrait Photo” was used, a technique drawn and adapted from Phototherapy methodologies (Musacchi, 2016; Weiser, 2004). During the walk, each participant has in turn the role of “photographer for a day” with the task of taking a

single shot per day that frames each of the other participants and a shot of the group, during the walk or the other phases of the day. Having only one shot encourages the search for a significant moment. For each photo, taken with the “walking tablet”, both the photographer and the represented subject are asked to give the photo a title. The resulting material is the social image of each person within the extraordinary experience, something that is particularly valuable during the adolescent phase.

In the return-reintegration phase, the shots are used in three ways:

- for monitoring the process of each participant;
- as a present: choosing a meaningful photograph of each person, the photo is given back to the adolescent as a gift, to which the companions and educators also contribute by writing a memory on the back of the photograph;
- for reflection and evaluation: together with all the other photographs of the week, the shots are used to build a group poster that is useful not only for stimulating reflection in the teenagers, but also for the educators’ evaluation of how the adolescents intervene, comment, relive and re-elaborate the experience during the walk.

The photographic material collected, therefore, also forms part of the documentation and it is used in the FIR that is handed over to the client who commissioned the project.

5.3 Group reflection from a stimulus image

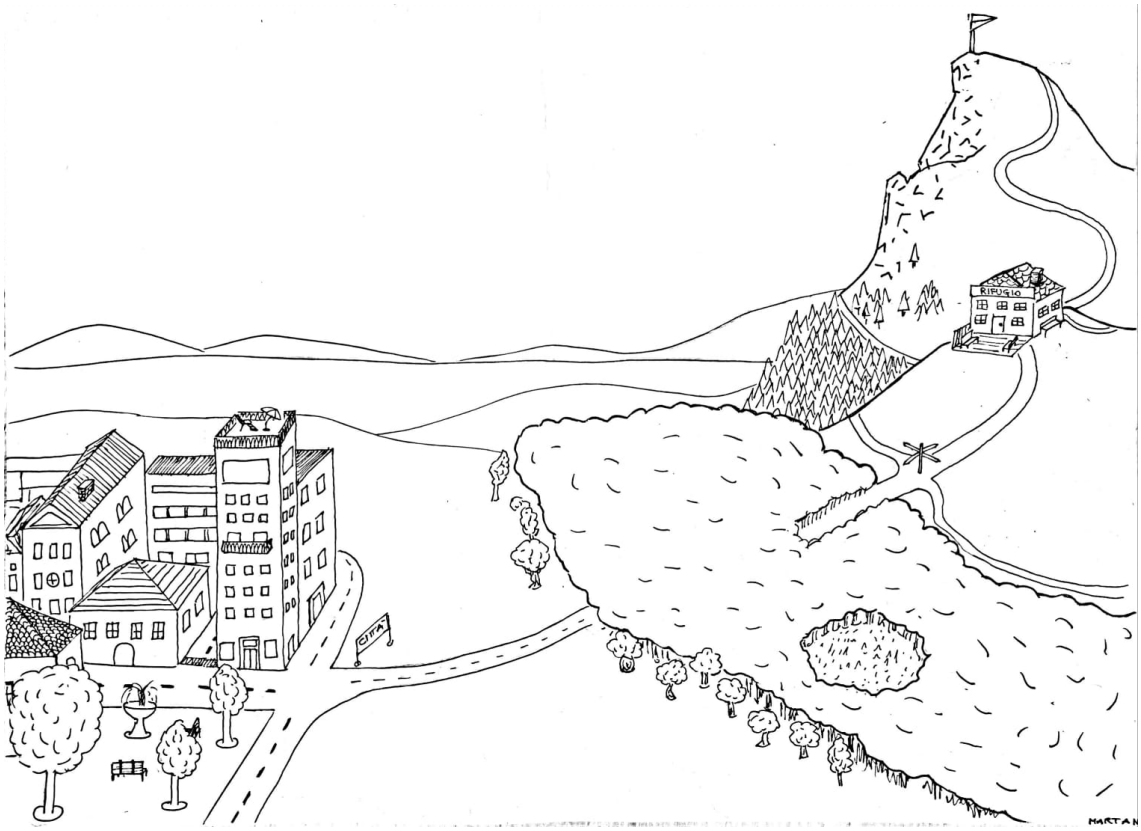
Reflecting on the need to have a documentation/evaluation tool that would serve as a stimulus for reflection and for sharing the experiences lived during the walking experience, the practitioners-researchers group decided to opt for a “stimulus image” to

use during the meeting that takes place in the return-reintegration phase. Each participant was asked to draw themselves inside the figure. The stimulus image was inspired by the Blob Tree Test tool (Wilson & Long, 2018), but different both in content and in the way it was used.

The picture (see Figure 4) used was created ad hoc and used with the following question: 'How did you feel in the walking experience? Please, graphically place yourself within the picture'. The educators aren't giving any interpretative or evaluative feedback. It is a tool aimed at stimulating the expression of individual experiences in the group dimension, mutual listening and exchange. Furthermore, unlike the Blob Tree Test in which characters are already drawn in various positions and postures, the image created ad hoc was left blank in order to expand the possibilities of imagining oneself within that context. A further difference concerns the choice of representing a panorama (instead of a tree) that could represent phases, moments and places actually passed through (city, path, forest, forks in the road, refuge, summit...), with both a concrete and symbolic value.

The activity was carried out willingly by the participants; in some cases, they chose to add phrases, words or verses to the self-representative character. The image was then used to enrich the process reflections of each participant and was included in the FIR.

FIGURE 4



6 Final Individual Report (FIR)

Through the information gathered with the different tools, it was possible to reconstruct a personal profile for each adolescent concerning his walking experience, which constitutes the FIR that is given to the coordinators and educators taking care of the teenagers in their residential community[14].

The main objective of the FIR is to show:

[14] The reason why the outcomes are shared only with the residential communities and not directly with the families and the schools is that the entitled subject to share these information with all the important figures is the residential community that is legally responsible for these minors.

- the image of the subject in a de-institutionalised context such as AE;
- the existential, experiential, relational journey that each participants went through during the experience;
- the relational processes triggered in the peer group and with the educators during the experience.

For reasons of confidentiality and privacy, here we can only present the structure the FIR (inspired by the ATES scale: Russel & Gillis, 2017; see Paragraph 4), which is organized around five areas plus a final synthesis:

(1) *"Being in nature"*: *self-portrait in an extraordinary, nature-based context*. In this section, the participant's self-portrait is reconstructed in three ways: the photographs taken during the experience ("Portrait Photo"), the participant's placement within the stimulus image and the behaviour observed by the educators during the post-walk closing meeting.

(2) *"Adventure activities"*: *how one deals with the challenges that activities in nature entail*. At the beginning of this part, the programme of the walk is summarised: stages, heights reached, timetables, etc. Subsequently, from the data collected with the PRE- and POST-walk participant questionnaires, a report is drawn up on the Expectations/Lived Experiences, Motivation, Resources and Attributions of Success/Failure, comparing the answers given before and after the experience. In this way, it was possible to assess for each individual participant whether their expectations were confirmed or not, whether their motivation for the walk underwent a change (positively or negatively), whether the resources they thought they possessed were adequate or not, who or what (companions, educators and environment) was perceived as a resource at the end

of the walk and, finally, whether there was a shift from the initial attributions of success/failure at the end of the walk.

(3) *"Peer relationship"*. Firstly, in this section, through the sociograms, it was possible to compare the expectation (pre) with the experience (post) of the participant with respect to the people with whom he could talk and from whom he could get help in the event of difficulties. Subsequently, through the answers obtained from the Participants' Questionnaire (sections "Representation of self in the group" and "Representation of fellow travellers") and from the POST-walk Educators Questionnaire, it was possible to reconstruct the perceptions (PRE- and POST-) of the participants, those of the companions and those of the educators in relation to the role assumed, the power, decision-making skills, investment of responsibility, energy lavished and orientation skills played by each participant within the group.

(4) *"Leader relationship"*. Starting from the Participants Questionnaire (section "Representation of the educators"), in this part of the FIR an assessment is made of how the perceived asymmetry towards the educators varies from PRE- to POST-experience. This comparison is made on the extent to which the young person has perceived the educator to be helpful, capable of listening, an obstacle, helpful in understanding how to deal with situations, helpful in general and restricting freedom. Through the open-ended answers, it was possible to check whether there was a variation in the description of the two educators and the project coordinator.

(5) *"Activity reflections"*. This part of the FIR was obtained from the data obtained from the DURING-walk Educators Questionnaire. The report shows the daily evaluations that the educators carried out on the participants with respect to the

following aspects: the level of participation, the degree of active participation through communicative interventions, the attitude of thinking and projecting oneself along the temporal dimension linked to the walk, the attributions (internal VS external) with respect to what happened during the day, the ability to decentralise, the ability to use the walk challenge in a metaphorical key in relation to one's own past life experiences. Each of these aspects observed in the individual adolescent is then compared with what was observed in the group as a whole.

(6) *Final Synthesis*. This final section of the FIR is dedicated to the overall summary evaluation of the participant.

FIGURE 5

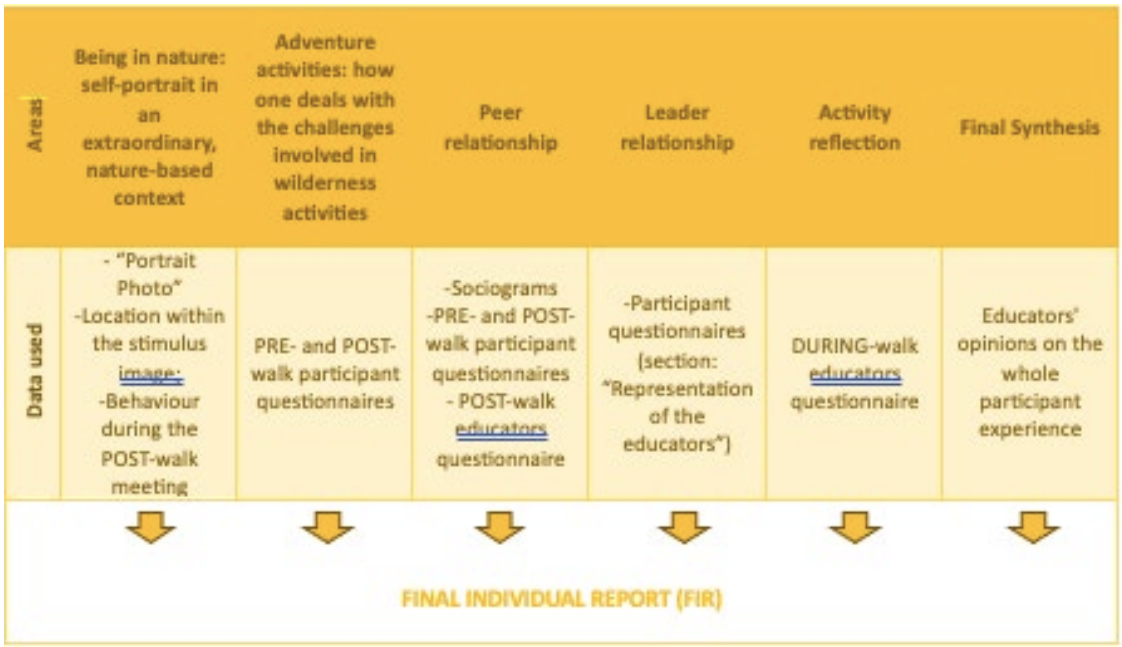


Figure 5 Structure and content of the Final Individual Report (FIR)

7 Conclusions

In order to increase the effectiveness of AE projects in promoting the psychophysical

and relational well-being of at-risk adolescents, the team of researchers and practitioners co-constructed – through a participatory and bottom-up process – an Integrated Model of Documentation and Evaluation (IMDE) for Back Into the Wild (BIW) project.

The IMDE is the product of three main interconnected factors:

- the characteristics (aims, methodologies, pedagogical devices) of AE with adolescents of BIW project;
- the creation of a process evaluation system, co-constructed with the practitioners, adopting a plurality of tools to be used at different points of the project;
- the need to produce a Final Individual Report (FIR) that could represent and synthetize the lived experience, in its multiple nuances and possible outcomes, to be delivered to those who committed the project and to the educational points of reference of each participant.

Since a theory-driven evaluation approach was chosen, it has been essential to carry out a preliminary phase of programme theory analysis, aimed at exploring – together with the practitioners – the values, assumptions and expectations characterising BIW project.

The traces that the group walking experience left in the participants were reconstructed thanks to the richness and multidimensionality of the material collected, which could show the positive nuances, the critical moments, the dynamics among peers and with the educators, the effects aroused by the intensive immersion in the nature-based and adventure dimension.

However, the paucity of data collected in this experimental phase does not allow for more meaningful evaluations of the scientific validity of this framework and of the educational effectiveness of the entire BIW project.

In order to improve the IMDE in the future, those who committed the project and the practitioners were asked about the positive and critical aspects of the tool.

Those who committed the project[15] (whose opinions were collected by the practitioners in face-to-face interviews) expressed positive comments regarding the usefulness of the IMDE:

- the director of the residential communities of the adolescents stated that the FIR was very helpful in drafting the reports for the social services;
- the social workers working with the teenagers in external penalties said that the FIR allowed them to have a more complete picture of these adolescents, compared to the one they have during routine institutional meetings where they are forced to remain "problem-centred";
- The FIRs of all participants were returned to Equilibero Association by the educators and their psychologist used them to draw up the adolescents' profiles.

The practitioners' point of view (collected through a specific questionnaire prepared by the researchers after the first application of the IMDE) highlights the following positive aspects:

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[15] For now, those who committed the project are the only subjects who received the FIR. Hopefully, the outcomes collected in the FIR will be shared in the future also with the adolescents families and schools, when possible.

- The IMDE facilitated the educational team in the work of sharing, comparing and reflecting on the experience, the educational dynamics triggered, the educational actions implemented and the educational styles of the individual educators.
- Consistency of the IMDE with the objectives for which it was constructed: from the integration of the data collected, an individual profile emerges that is particularly interesting to be returned to the educational and social services, because it is decontextualised, alternative and extra-ordinary and can be useful for those who deal with minors and their well-being on a daily basis in the institutional context of residential communities.
- Positive functionality of the IMDE: educators did not report any particular dysfunctional aspects. The educators particularly appreciated the possibility provided by the IMDE to also take into account the point of view of the adolescents themselves. Even though it was inspired by the ATES scale and kept its areas, it has become a phenomenological tool, as it enhances cross-feedback;
- The IMDE was found to be very useful for returning reports to those who commissioned project.

With regard to criticalities, after this first application, we can state that the limitations of the IMDE relate to two main factors: the demand for commitment, energy and time on the part of the educators; and obtaining the willingness and active involvement of the adolescents in filling in the questionnaires.

On the first aspect, we can say that Equilibero team found time during the walk to fill in the questionnaires and manage the photography tool without any particular difficulty. Facilitating this was the adoption of the “walking tablet”, which made it

possible to collect both the photographs and the questionnaires in a single tool, archiving everything online.

However, the most substantial effort was necessary to analyse the data from the questionnaires, to reconstruct the sociograms, to analyse the photographic documentation and the documentation from the "group reflection from a stimulus image" activity: the drafting of the individual reports is a demanding task, much of it carried out without remuneration. Nevertheless, the work was evaluated as sustainable, interesting and very stimulating by the educators themselves. Involving the adolescents and respecting the time and manner of administering the tools also required commitment and determination, in a setting as complex and full of unforeseen events as that of an educational journey. Here too, however, the determination of the educators made the operation feasible.

It is clear from these considerations that the motivation and interest of the educators are pivotal elements for the functioning of the IMDE. We assume that being part of an experimental and participative process – which was experienced by them also as an opportunity for personal and professional growth – was a very important added value. However, it should be pointed out that in order to set up an IMDE such as this one, it is not enough to rely on the passion of educators and researchers. A dedicated investment is needed from the commissioners to recognise economically the work done, by including it in the number of hours paid in the project.

Unfortunately, there is a paradox in the Italian situation. On the one hand, the officially recognised working time for evaluation and documentation activities is steadily decreasing (almost zero); on the other hand, the demands for measuring the effectiveness of projects are increasing. This situation produces standardised,

decontextualised and top-down forms of evaluation: the opposite of what was intended to be produced in this experience, which can also be credited with bucking the trend.

The application of the IMDE has been continuing, collecting new data in BIW projects in the years 2022 and 2023. Soon, we will be able to define a more circumstantial and detailed picture and an evaluation of both the IMDE and the outcomes of this AE project in the socio-educational field.

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