



RWL Case-Study – La scuola nel bosco (IT)

Country

Italy – provider: Fondazione Villa Ghigi Bologna info@fondazionevillaghigi.it -

Name of the programme

La scuola nel bosco (The school in the wood)

Age of the children involved?

3 to 6 (mostly 5) and their teachers. The program also involved the children in the first grade of primary school for the evaluation.

Teaser/Short Introduction

This program aimed at helping young children living in an Italian city (Bologna) to develop a bond with nature promoting experience and relationships between the world around them and themselves, both as individuals and as a community and focusing on the constant and unmediated contact with the nature.

The program aims to bring classes in the woods around Bologna with the good and the bad weather, it promotes spontaneous play with the natural elements, encourages the use of the senses, movement, imagination and creativity. Teachers, school support staff, environmental educators, pedagogical coordinators, researchers, university students and parents have been actively involved in the program.

The program initially funded by the Emilia Romagna Region, has planned a training program, an experiment with school children, a study conducted by the University of Bologna, documentation of the experience and a series of public meetings.

What is the frame?

Giving back nature to childhood: the wood is our school.

What are the goals of the programme?

To encourage debate about early childhood and the spontaneous bond that links young children to nature.

To think about children and their needs in a perspective that sees them as future active citizens with rights and responsibilities for caring about society and the planet.

To propose to parents and teachers an alternative and innovative school model that promotes sustainability in lifestyles.

What values are promoted in the programme?

According to the hand model, the values promoted were mainly related to care for local environment, the unity with nature and the cooperation. In a prospective way: the respect for nature and care for the state of our planet.

Which competences are promoted that empower learners to shape a sustainable future?

Dealing with change - The first, big change that children and teachers had to face was the switch from an indoor environment to an outdoor one and the necessity to adapt interpersonal relationships, rhythms and activities to the new situation. Children were left free to decide what to do most of the time and to organise their activities. Help on behalf of the adults was provided only when necessary. To gain more independence and make the most out of this experience



children needed to develop new skills, such as use a map and orientate themselves, change clothes on their own, wash hands in an unusual way that preserve the waste of sweet water. Teachers, on the other hand, needed to learn how to play a new educational role by being present for the children when needed, but letting them develop their own games and follow their aptitudes.

Critical thinking - Both children and adults were faced with new problems that constantly needed solutions. For children a problem solving attitude was challenged while climbing trees and steep paths, transporting heavy objects such as branches, finding their way in a new and vast environment and learning to deal effectively with an ever changing contest, recognizing similarities, differences, connections and relationships between phenomena, causes and effects.

You&I all the world around us - The children have developed their knowledge in relation to themselves, their peers and in relations with the nature around them.

Which of the specific scientific concepts does the programme relate to?

Cycles – Children learn from experience about the constant changes that happen in the natural environment. They become more aware of the weather and its consequences on their daily activities (enjoy the mud when it’s raining, bathe in the sun) and on the environment. Because the program takes place in different seasons (autumn and spring), children also learn about yearly changes in nature.

Relations and energy flows - The “wood” is a complex ecosystem, the children become part of a full of relationships and interconnections world.

Which ecological problems are involved, if any, and how? (Refer to mindmaps of 9 planetary boundaries)

Biodiversity – Children learn first-hand about plants and animals in the woods. They can ask questions to know their names and characteristics but are also free to observe and wonder at their own pace. They are encouraged to use transparent boxes to observe the animals, keep them with them for a while as pets and then free them.

Freshwater and natural resources use – For example children learn to wash their hands using only two basins of water, one with soap and the other with clear water to rinse them. This proved to be quite a messy task in the beginning, but everybody soon gained confidence and the hand-washing procedure became a normal part of everyday activities and hopefully a good habit for life.

Transferability: Which different areas of learning are included and how?

Related to the learners themselves – Children had to pay attention to others and help them accomplish difficult tasks. Some had problems climbing steep paths or jumping over ditches and soon others came in to help; transporting heavy materials and building shelters and other structures also required a constant cooperation.

Related to the natural environment - Children are naturally curious about the natural environment and willing to learn from it. They learnt about animals and plants and how to interact with them with respect and awareness.

What educational strategies (learning models, methods, etc.) are used in your programme?

The central idea is to let children experience nature without forcing them to perform specific tasks, the teachers are present to stimulate brain, senses and heart.

The program has a main frame that connect the experiences, the forest: The wood turned out to be an extraordinary laboratory for learning in which it is possible to perform not structure activities to meet children’s needs. The forest is a rich and multisensory setting and the ideal contest for exploring nature, because it stimulates intuition and the use of the senses and helps children to know their limits. Constantly changing and becoming, the wood triggers the imagination and it offers with all its natural materials endless possibilities for playing and construction activities. Full



of mystery and adventure, the wood fosters mutual support, the friendship, autonomy and self-esteem and encourages children to learn from each other.

Among the key instruments used.

- Exploration was the key strategy to the program. Children were left free to explore and learn at their own pace from the inputs the environment provided. Explanation and comparison were always available when asked for and provided for more organized activities.
- Elaboration of the experiences, it was a daily routine through circles and rituals in which children were asked to speak or draw the «best of» their day or to thank different natural elements for the experiences they lived.

How is the programme evaluated? How do you know the programme achieved its educational goals?

The Faculty of Science of Education of the University of Bologna has supported the entire program according to the methodology of the research – action methodology, with a defined actions of planning, monitoring, evaluation, self-evaluation and reflection. Throughout the project, the working group has met regularly in plenary and / or individual specific groups:

- reflection on the educational project implemented,
- resolution of problems that have occurred during the program,
- cross-evaluation of educational goals and outcomes
- activity results,
- analysis of the perspective to carry on the program in the future.

Observers kept a daily diary throughout the time the children were in the woods and noted all the relevant aspects concerning learning, emotional, social and ethical happenings. Changes in children's and teachers' attitudes were evident during the course of the program. As the children participating in the program were mostly in their last year of kindergarten, observers suggest a further encounter with them during the following year, the first in primary school for the children and a comparison with their new classmates that didn't participate in the school in the forest. According to them this could be a good way to measure how the program was effective in changing the children's approach to issues involving nature and ecology.

Teachers and parents has used special form to evaluate the program To collect the many contributions to the evaluation of the program it was decided to activate a blog.

As indicators for the participation of teachers and parents it has been considered: the total number of people present at the evaluation meetings, the number of teachers and practitioners involved in the training process, the number of trials performed.

Among the main results monitored:

1. to mature and spread awareness that children are in urgent need of a direct contact with nature with continuous experience instead of occasional and specific project.
2. The public meetings for the presentation of the program also involved several and various stakeholder. The city of Bologna decided to , and not just to schools, some of the experiences that have attracted a lot of interest, such as "Saturday in the woods" a series of meetings on a monthly basis from October to May, aimed at children and to their parents, and "summer in the woods" a summer school for a period of a few weeks.

Concerning the «numbers» of the program a table was compiled.



Indicator	Level of success
Number of people participating in the meetings held before and after the program	400
Number of teachers and educators involved in the training course	35
Number of trials	30
Media attention	50 articles in print or internet

Describe the programme

At the school in the woods the day goes by without constraints and specific duties dictated by time and defined activities. The timetable includes few important moments that mark the routines and rituals:

- Arrival on the site and short moment for free playing. Then the sound of the woodpecker (a wood rattle) refers to the welcome circle.
- Snack and chat: Where are we going today?
- Reaching of the site decided by the children to do morning activities. Everyone walks with the cart to the chosen places according to weather conditions and/or the children's wishes. Morning activities were the more structured ones and mainly based on exploration and movement: free play and explorations, collection and finding or structured activities in which the children choose whether to participate or not (i.e. working the clay or mud, building a hut, reading picture books, building a path with the help of ropes).
- Lunch time. Before the meal, each child washes his hands (water in the buckets, soap, towels). In a circle, everyone thanks the earth, the sun, nature and then we eat together. The children bring anything left from the lunch to the chickens and rabbits at the nearby Mrs. Rosa's farm.
- Mostly free time in the afternoon. For the little ones there is the possibility to take a rest under the lime trees.
- Return to the parking lot and meeting with the parents. In the tree-lined lawn the woodpecker calls the last circle of the day.

New moments were introduced in the daily routine during the year such as reading time and a night spent sleeping in the woods. During this experience the children lived a very long day that ended with a bonfire, a night walk and encounter with the fireflies and finally, a night spent far from their parents.

Photos or videos, logos

Instruments. Children were provided a map of the woodland and learnt to use it to move around orientating themselves, they had some rope to use and baskets to collect things from nature.



Daily routine. Different moments of the children's day. Walking freely (i.e. not forming a line) towards the chosen place; cooperating to transport materials with the cart; participating in the circle.



Activities. Children experiencing different aspects of life outdoors: getting to know new insects; climbing and relaxing on a tree branch; climbing up a steep path.



Feedback. Drawings of the «best of» moments of their experience in the woods. «Run with my friend»; «Climb the wounded cedar»; «Looking for insects, and my favourite is the little greenie.»; «Fireflies and the bonfire».



A video is available at the following url (Italian, no subtitles):

<http://lascuolanelbosco.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/ecco-finalmente-il-video-della-scuola-nel-bosco/>

The web site of the project: <http://lascuolanelbosco.wordpress.com/>