



# School in the Wood

Valentina Bergonzoni, Fondazione Villa Ghigi

Workshop on the 6 - 8 November 2015

## The Future of Outdoor Learning in a Changing World

---

### **Introduction**

*School in the Wood* is an educational program run by Fondazione Villa Ghigi <http://www.fondazionevillaghigi.it>, an Italian organization born in 2001 from the union of the Municipality of Bologna, the Bologna district government and the University of Bologna. Its headquarters are located in the first hill around Bologna, in a beautiful public park where children and citizens can have the opportunity to live one or more days in close contact with nature.

'School in the Wood' is one of Fondazione Villa Ghigi's program that especially aims at helping young children 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 non-mediated contact with nature.

School in the Wood 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 five 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.

### **The workshop**

The workshop has been run during the conference 3 times with different groups composed by 20 to 34 people. The workshop has expected a short introduction indoor, a central part of activities outdoor and a final section indoor with all the participants to review the outdoor activities and to talk over some key aspects in relation to the hand model and to the pedagogical methodological point of view.

#### **First: inside.**

The participants had the possibility to know in a deeper way the context where the project School in the wood has developed, the objectives, the results and the strong and the weak points in relation to the different experimentations.

#### **Second: outside.**

This outdoor section based on curiosity, interest and questions that Nature can rise in each person. The participants had the opportunity to lose by itself in the wood and explore the natural



environment, listen to its sounds, smell the fragrances of trees, flowers, ground and animals. We encouraged everybody to live a personal experience in nature, alone, without speaking to others and thinking to one's own personal problems.

Participants had one hour to climb up the little hill near the Conference Center and to explore different settings such as an intricate wood, an old ruin, an open grassland. During the personal walk, they had the opportunity to choose and pick up some natural elements that were peculiar of the place or that reminded something special. At a special sonorous signal, participants have met together again and had the opportunity to organize the natural elements following the suggestions that each element can give and to present them to everybody.

### **Third: inside again.**

Once inside we dedicated some time to open the discussion with participants about the personal experience during the outdoor section and to address some main questions about project's methodology and the links with the hand model.

The main debate concerned the importance to develop a project where learners can enhance a non-mediated contact with Nature, developing unity with Nature. The participants have underlined the great experience they had. Especially they have appreciated the possibility to have the time to follow their personal interest in discovering the place and the surroundings without impositions. The learners have the opportunity to investigate through the scientific method, developing a strong relationship with environment that is first emotional, cognitive and imaginative.

Another aspect pointed out is the power of Nature to include and to build a common language between different learners with different stories (as foreign children, children with disability or in other situation of disadvantage). A project as *The school in the wood* aims to encourage children to interact and support each other (about values: cooperation, equality).

Some participants have underlined that letting young learners to be free to explore nature can arise some safety problems. During the debate the participant have shared some inspiration tool to overcome this problem:

- The management is critical. The teachers have to choose very carefully and know very well the place where to run this kind of activities and programs.
- The role of adults (teachers, educators, providers and school support staff) is to leave the child free to choose but to be present for every child need. The adults foster the educational relationship that finds a new expression in the wood. The teachers needs to be able of arousing curiosity without impositions or forcing the learning process or anticipating knowledge. The training of teachers, educators and school support staff is crucial.
- The necessity of congruence of the language and the presence of a strong frame so that all the things speak the same language: the wood is our school.
- The domino effect of the program (interaction with families and citizens, outdoor education trainings for teachers, educators and school support staff and other interested persons, partnership with elderly citizens as competences-carriers).

