

## CHILDREN AND THEIR OWN LAND: BUILDING CONNECTIONS THROUGH REPORTING

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the journalism workshops held in Ussita (Italy) during the 2019's winter. The workshops were aimed at children and they involved local kids from 5 to 10 years old. This project was a part of the data collection for the doctoral research program "Growing up informed". The method involved participants observation, field recording, written and drawn material. Ussita is one of the towns wrecked by the earthquakes of 2016. We chose this place because the research program focuses also on media education as a mean to develop territorial awareness. Territorial awareness may be crucial after an earthquake, for it is one of the features that create resilience. The main teaching activity was about explaining to children how to make interviews, matching a previous format we studied in 2018. They made interviews in different locations and situations. They were able to meet a photographer, a biologist (Ussita is part of a National Park), a member of a local association. The children also visited several old people in their emergency homes to interview them. We organized a follow up in April in which they had to interview some local adults about a traditional festival that was about to be held. The group managed to interview these people, even if the context was slightly different, showing they remembered what they have learned. The results show how children managed to tackle a variety of local topic (nature, history, problems, opportunity) by interviewing people and how the activity affected their local awareness in this sensitive moment.

**Keywords:** media education; journalism; local awareness; expert role

### OBJECTIVES OF THE INVESTIGATION

This work represents a first analysis of the second phase of data collection for the doctoral research project "Growing up informed", which is about the relationship between children, journalism, local and global awareness. This project was mainly influenced by the circumstances of the earthquakes that stroke central Italy during 2016 and 2017, causing hundreds of casualties and mas-

sive destruction in le Marche region. The objective of the investigation is to tackle the possibility of developing local awareness in children, in a very specific context, by teaching them and leading them in the core activity of journalists: interviewing and writing articles.

### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the workshop is based on the conceptualization of Vygotsky's theory and drawn considering his idea of proximal development zone (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, the scaffolding strategy (Wood, Bruner & Ross 1976) was adopted, in order to connect the personal knowledge to potentially new concepts and looking at the creation of a community of learners (Johnson, Johnson, Holubeck, 1994). These frames of work were connected in an integrated strategy (Fink, 2013) to offer participants a learning environment able to enhance experts and peer-to-peer scaffolding, exchanges of meaning and co-construction of knowledge within significant learning experiences (Hogan & Pressley, 1997). We also considered Piaget's theory in order to understand the possibility for the youngest children to participate in the activities, that needed reversible operations in order to be done (Piaget, 1976).

### Resilience

The topic of local awareness is tightly connected to the concept of resilience. For resilience, we mean "a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance" (Norris et al., 2008). The factors of personal resilience (Cantoni, 2014) comprehend optimism; self-esteem; psychological stability (control, commitment and challenge); ability to focus on good things; social support (listening and telling). Resilience is also linked to local knowledge (Patel et al., 2017)

### Interviewing

We focused on the activity of interviewing because of the previous research we held in the city of Macerata two years ago. That research proved that, with the right design, there is a connection between interviewing and the growing of local awareness. We recall some statements from that study to explain why we chose to interview as a media to tackle the objective of growing local awareness:

- the interviewing activity seemed to be perceived by the children as something enjoyable;
- the children got to know the town better, not only by sightseeing but especially by asking questions as a part of their task in the workshop;
- the results showed that this design already works in terms of developing [...] a sense of community.

### The context

The location of the workshops deserves a brief description in order to understand the learning environment of this project. This research took place in Ussita, one of the most damaged cities by the earthquake and place of several epicenters. Ussita is a mountain city located in the hearth of Sibillini mountains national park. By the time the workshop took place the population, previously evacuated, had come back in emergency houses provided by the Government. For the population, this was the first winter in these houses. The bar and a few shops had reopened in an emergency structure and the only common space available indoor was an old wooden house, called Casetta Ruggeri, in which the community held religious ceremonies, meetings and also the city council. So we had to locate the workshops with children there, managing to clean the space and make it suitable for children and then rearrange it for the other uses. We spent most of the time in Casetta

Ruggeri, programming also interviews in the emergency houses and outside in general in order to connect children with the rest of population, especially the old ones (which are the majority). We learned from Emergency volunteers that are still assisting the population on a psychological level, that children could present stress symptoms (in terms of restlessness) due to the situation.

### **THE PARTICIPANTS**

The participants were selected on a voluntary base among the children from Ussita. The communication about the workshop indicates a brief explanation of the research project and a minimum-maximum age to join (5 to 10 years old). All the children living in Ussita and belonging in this age range participated, for a total of 11 participants. In the group there were three couples of siblings. The majority of the participants were 9 or 10 years old, two girls were 5 years old. There were 7 girls and 4 boys. All the children already knew each other. Their families were previously informed about the research and they were aware of objectives and methodologies. The relationship with children's families is not a part of this particular paper, but their involvement in the process is still something to point out because the learning environment, in a broader sense, was positively affected by the collaborative spirit of the families.

### **THE METHODOLOGY**

The workshop took place last winter. In particular, we met the children from January to February, with a follow up in April. One researcher was always present and was the referent for children and their parents. The methods of collecting data during the process were participant observation, cognitive maps, field recording (both audio than handwritten), pictures. To guarantee the triangulation also in terms of observers other two Ph.D. students were involved in some of the meetings, while in the others we brought to the children experts in different field as people to interview. All the experts were previously asked not to influence children in their decision process about the question and to answer to all of them without underlining in a judgmental way possible naïve theories emerging from the children.

The first step was to check if every participant was able to make reversible operations and this was checked with the Piaget's Mountain task. This was needed especially for 5 years old children. Then we collect participant's naïve theories about journalism. We made this by conceptual maps and drawings (for the smallest children). Then we asked children to write (or draw) about the previous day, in order to understand their linguistic competence.

The next step was to provide them activities to learn how to make interviews. We made this following the same method of the previous workshop held in Macerata. The key point of this phase is to let children deciding which question they want to ask, without helping them unless they ask for any kind of advice. Advices were also very general and directed to help them in their elaboration process of the question.

They firstly made interviews among themselves, then we brought experts. In particular, they met a professional photographer, a biologist who works in the Nation park, the president of a local association. They also met local people in their emergency houses, asking them about their lives, interests and so on. The last meeting was about collecting the materials, reflecting on the activities and, for the participants willing or capable of doing that, write again a short text. As final outputs children were able to put together, with the help of the researcher, several articles (that will be published on the online local newspaper Cronache Maceratesi Junior).

In April, together with another association that is working in the same territory, we organized a follow up with children. They were asked to make interviews to local old people about a traditional

festival (called Piantamaggio) that was about to be held again and that was consigned to oblivion for many years.

### THE RESULTS

Being a preliminary analysis, the results we present here are mainly connected with five of the articles put together by the children. Still, we also provide some relevant comments by the children to underline that interviewing meets the children needs of learning about things in an enjoyable way. In particular, all the participants, when asked about their favorite moments about the workshop, indicate interviewing among other activities. One girl also said: "It is beautiful that we can make this here, even in a place so small". At the beginning of every meeting that followed the first one children asked for "going interviewing people".

The articles were about: a traditional receipt from the grandmother of one of the children; how to live in the mountain; ice skating; interview to a professional photojournalist; interview to a biologist who works in the National Park.

Writing the traditional local receipt was one's participant idea, a boy aged 10, who picked the topic and independently made the material collection (text and pictures) in order to write the article. He decided to write on his laptop and gave the researcher a full work in a drive pen. This work took him to research into his grandmother knowledge, asking her the receipt, making pictures for every phase and then writing in order to meet a general public (the readers of the newspaper). In his article he addresses the reader at the beginning and in the end (he writes "Dear readers" in the beginning and use the second plural person throughout the articles). In the article, the boy shows a more elaborate language than the first text he was asked to write about his daily routine.

The article about how to live in the mountain was a reportage one of the girls (aged 10 as well) decided to write after attending a conference about this topic. She wrote a brief still very rich text, using her knowledge about the events (the five "w" of journalism), her opinion about what was said ("we children must know the mountain that embraces us") and also metaphors (as "the white bones of the mountain" to indicate rocks).

The article about ice skating was written by two girls who decided to collaborate. They provide a text and a drawing about the topic. The topic was chosen from their previous experience in Ussita, which had an ice skating palace (damaged by the earthquake and closed at the moment). In the article the girls explain to readers why they enjoyed doing this activity.

In the interview to the photojournalist, they asked very compelling questions about his work, how he deals with people who don't like being photographed and how to find news. They also asked the question "What's your surname?" as the fifth one. A timing that indicates they remembered while interviewing that they needed that information for the article.

In the interview to the biologist, they were able to discuss the concept of National Park, addressing in a peer-to-peer debate their theories about this concept. Someone then already knew, some others said it was a playground (in Italian park is said "parco" and the playground is "parco giochi"). Their theories were shared among them with the researcher as a facilitator. Only after the biologist explained the concept of National Park and the interview continued. The children asked many questions about his work and the animals he could have met, showing a deep understanding of the local fauna. For example one of the boys explained to the other participants how to recognize a chamois, that is typical of this area). Part of the interview was conducted outside while walking on the street near a small river. The children also made pictures for the article.

During the follow up in April children were very excited to make again an interview. They could remember the basic rules and asked so many questions that we eventually had to call an end to the

question time in order to let them go home with their parents. The interview was recorded on camera so the children didn't take any notes. Still, they could remember, even in May, what they have learned from this interview. In May a writer came indeed to Ussita and set up a meeting with them, asking the children to tell him about the festival Piantamaggio. They were able to tell him and also to create a short novel about it.

## DISCUSSION

The results show how children were able to connect to very local topics in a very simple and enjoyable way, despite their age difference. Reporting their interviews involved them at different levels and pointed out different attitudes. Some preferred to take notes, some others to record with a smartphone, others wanted only to take pictures. The fact that they freely chose topics and question make articles a good parameter to show how the activities improved their local knowledge.

They never directly spoke about earthquakes or their wrecked houses. Their focus was on traditions, nature, funny activities, general curiosities they had relating to the person they were interviewing. Earthquake emerged as a topic just one time, during a conversation among them.

The relationship with the researcher and the preparedness of the experts before meeting the children was a relevant aspect of this workshop. The researcher, as a participant observer, did not give direct answers or advice, but at the same time, she created a trusted environment with common rules in order to work together. The commons rules were shared with the families so that parents could appreciate the values and approaches beneath the process, agreeing with not interfering with it. Due to the good relationship established between the researcher and the group (children and parents), we were also able to collect "requests" from the children about further activities they would enjoy to do. They were almost all about local topics: how to recognize animals and plants, walking in nature and so on. The children showed a refreshed connection to their environment, in terms of knowledge, awareness, and willing to participate in the community activities. Some of them also showed the willingness to continue taking pictures of what they experienced outside the workshop, asking their parents to provide cameras to report their everyday life.

Some critical points must be also underlined. First of all, the space available was very small and some children experienced difficulties in concentrating on writing or drawing (when asked) because of the closeness to the others. The second one is the variety of ages that was compelling to deal with. The 5 years old girls requested a different approach and activities and sometimes they got bored or tired more often than the older children. The third one is the high level of energy of these children that requested many moments of playing or running to let them be able to focus on the main activities again. The last one is the difficulty in asking the participants to write something. When asked, children perceived the task as a "scholastic" one, and someone them tended to reject what looked like homework.

## CONCLUSIONS

As shown by the results, the objective of developing local awareness in children of that age range with a traditional journalistic activity as interviewing and making articles was reached through the workshop. We started from the children's naïve theories and then we moved from their knowledge in order to explain some basic rules about interviewing. They were then free to choose what topics they wanted to tackle and with what means (writing, drawing, photography, recordings and so on). This whole process let them closer to their environment, giving them the opportunity of significant learning, both on a technical point of view and on a sociocultural point of view. The follow up confirmed once again the initial hypothesis about interviewing as a good activity to enhance local

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knowledge and awareness among these children. This workshop, following the previous one in Macerata, and confirming some of the hypothesis already tackled the previous year, traces a good direction for further workshops on the same topic and with similar aged children. Further analysis will be conducted on the collected data in order to show a wider perspective about the connections between journalism, children and local knowledge and awareness.

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